

UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

LET'S PLAY A STORY TOGETHER

NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION IN A BOARD GAME

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1 Introduction

This research explores the relationship of narratives and games from a cognitive perspective through a medium not previously considered. Whether games can portray narrative has been a matter of debate since the 90s, involving scholars of the pre-teen field of game studies and scholars of the teenage field of narratology. The debate has appeared as though a fight between contenders as young as the fields themselves, but with grown-ups instead. To avoid crashing headlong into that pile up, this study is informed by a fresh definition of narrative in connection with data not stained by categorical expectations.

Previously in game studies, especially with anything having to do with narrative, the focus of most studies has been on video games, with no consideration given to other types of games, and whether they are more or less capable of delivering narrative than computer games. Similarly, narratology as a field is still seeking a definition for its object of interest. It has been at pains ever since its inception in the sixties to include more than literature in a formal delineation of what a narrative or a story is and how it is told. The coincidental boom of new media has brought one conceptual challenge after another, participatory media such as games being one major area of confusion. Could board games, a blind spot of all but pedagogical studies and a much older ludic form than their digital counterparts, bring fresh grapes into a sour discussion?

The questions asked in this paper revolve around the following central themes: What in board games elicits narrative understanding? How do players take cues from the game to build a chronology for events, a broader temporal and spatial environment for those events and an inventory of characters involved? How do players identify with the characters and their perception of the game- or storyworld? What can board games show us about narrative in games? Is there a way of signification in formal play that is special to board games?

To study where game, story and mind meet volunteers played one game of *Betrayal at House on the Hill*, a partly co-operative adventure where the game rules and goals vary from game to game, and gave an account of the events, changes, characters and motives – in short, the world – they experienced. Observation of the gameplay and a loose, casual semi-structured group interview was used to get a

glimpse into the mind of players as interpreters (and authors?) of narrative. The interview was structured around Ryan's (2004) model of narrative as a cognitive construct, wherein a narrative must fulfill three criteria to constitute narrativity: First, it must create a world and populate it with characters and objects. Second, the world must change. Third, the narrative must allow for a network of goals, plans, causal relations, and psychological motivations to be formed around the narrated events.

I predict that *Betrayal at House on the Hill* will easily pass the test for two out of the three criteria for having narrativity. Players are likely to report that the game successfully posited the existence of things and dressed them up with properties. They will be able to enumerate and name them easily. They are also likely to say that the game world they experienced went through changes during gameplay that were accidental (i.e. not habitual) or caused by the players themselves. They will not be able to name as many of these as in the previous item. Some will have passed them by. The most variance we will see with regard to criterion three: reconstructing networks of goals, plans, motives and cause-effect relations.

2 Theoretical framework

In this part we will begin by tracing why games have been perceived of as problematic when crossed with narrative. Digging deeper, we will first delve into why games have been a problem for narratology, and, on the way up, why narratology has been unaccommodating to games. In addition, we will need to pin down an understanding of narrative and game separately before coming back to their intersection. Having the above for this study, we will drive on to perhaps find a way for what is intuitively possible to be so in theory and practice as well – a peaceful means for games to ride the narrative bus too.

2.1 Narratives and games have issues (or do they?)

It is a given in western thought that medium conditions narration. Reflections on this can be traced to the writings of Plato when he distinguishes the diegetic and mimetic modes of narration, but it was up to Aristotle to first name medium as a property of art. Defining poetry as imitation, he goes on to distinguish three ways of imitation of

which one he calls medium. However, what he means by the word are tragedy, comedy, epic poetry and drama – categories not commonly called media today (Ryan, 2009, p. 264-265).

We may fast-forward to the 20th century, as the concept of medium did not come under study till then. Though landmarks in the understanding of the relationship between medium and narrative could be named, it was the technological explosion of this period that radically altered the concept of medium (Ryan, 2009, 265). The word, used in connection with a growing number of then past, current and future means of communication, came to also distinguish ways of communication by their semiotic support and was in contrast with Aristotle's conception, where media had but one semiotic channel – verbal language.

Concurrently with the technological quake hammering notions of medium, the discipline of narratology was born. Rooted in Russian formalism, the founders of the study of narrative representation and its logic, principles and practices were, among others, Barthes, Bremond and McLuhan (Meister, 2009, pp. 329-330). It was recognized especially by these three from the beginning that narrative transcends medium (Ryan, 2009, pp. 265-266). Barthes himself put no barriers to the vehicles capable of accommodating stories, allowing for pantomime, paintings, stained-glass windows, movies, the news and conversation etc. to carry narrative meaning (Barthes and Duisit, 1975, pp. 237). In spite of strong advocacy for a very open conception of narrative and a plurimedial approach to studying them, narratology focused almost exclusively on literature all the way until the so called narrative turn in humanities in the late 20th century. Only in the past twenty years has the study of narrative extended into non-literary or non-verbal forms (Ryan, 2009, pp. 266).

With that extension, after television and film, a medium was approached that has variously attempted to emulate film: video games. Studying video games from a narrative perspective opened up the larger, thorny issue at hand here: Can games tell stories? That is the label on a can of worms often cast as a fight between ludologists (of the not yet quite universally acknowledged field of game studies) and narratologists, and that is about all that can be said of it while maintaining a straight face. The labels for the opposing camps are thrown around like

sticky balls at whim, while no one wants to have one attached to them. It is a regular hot potato.

Why the chafe? Ludologists supposedly hold to a position that discards narrative from games altogether, while narratologists would supposedly analyze games from nothing but a narrative perspective. Ludologists have felt a sort of colonialism into the fledgling field of game studies from literature and film studies, being rather off-put at the rejection of their efforts in centering game studies on the study of game mechanisms. While scholars of games fear their domain encroached upon, narratologists interested in games have been hurt by the resistance encountered trying to import methods and approaches used in narratology to the realm of games. The latter have allegedly not defined their understandings of narrative clearly or have used the concept in contradiction with definitions attributed to their field and their sources (see Frasca, 2003).

It is an ugly history that kind of was not. Looking back at it, Frasca (2003), reflectively studying the game—narrative discourse of the past few decades, was not able to find most alleged statements as to who said or thought what of the matter or the other side. Representing the ludologists, he notes that many of the above claims are oversimplifications and misinterpretations of himself, Juul, Eskelinen and Aarseth. Apparently, it is one thing to not prefer narratology as an approach to games and another to discard narrative entirely. Writings taking part in the supposed debate are rife with out-of-context quotation and misrepresentation (Frasca, 2003). Depending on the commenter, this is variously perceived of as smoke and mirrors to defame either narratology or ludology, two imperial powers vying for control over ‘Game island’. That is all not to say that narratology and ludology are all buddy buddy, as can be seen in the below quote from Juul (2001).

I would like to repeat that I believe that: 1) The player can tell stories of a game session. 2) Many computer games contain narrative elements, and in many cases the player may play to see a cut-scene or realise a narrative sequence. 3) Games and narratives share some structural traits. Nevertheless, my point is that: 1) Games and stories actually do not translate to each other in the way that novels and movies do. 2) There is an inherent conflict between the now of the interaction and the past or "prior" of the narrative. You can't have narration and

interactivity at the same time; there is no such thing as a continuously interactive story. 3) The relations between reader/story and player/game are completely different - the player inhabits a twilight zone where he/she is both an empirical subject outside the game and undertakes a role inside the game. (Juul, 2001, pp. 40-62)

Even taking into account Frasca's (2003) amends, it is evident that there is opposition to including games alongside other media as capable of telling stories in their right. From the quote above, we may infer that Juul, for one, would not nest games next to movies and dance under the heading "narrative media". It is the player, he says, who can tell a story, not the game. He is explicit in his stance to narrative and interaction – there is no coexistence of the two.

What rubs people who argue that games are antithetical to narratives the wrong way, according to Jenkins (2004), is that various attempts have been made to map narrative structures devised with non-interactive, non-player-led media in mind onto video games, disregarding their unique mode of entertainment. The discussion is more concerned with mapping current models of narration – with their rules and conventions – onto games, rather than molding new models to accommodate what appear to intuitively be narrative works. This is pretty much how Frasca (2003), clarifying the issue, phrases the problem as well: the characteristics of games are not compatible with definitions of narrative espoused within narratology.

In spite of this, the intersection of games and stories gets a lot of traffic to the point of congestion. Conferences and courses relating games and stories flourish in the "manicured garden" that is the university like a "virulent weed" (Zimmerman, 2004). While games and studies around them are not out to devour their host establishment, the preceding analogy highlights the constrained relationship many game and/or story scholars have with their object of inquiry. The collection of papers (Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan, 2004) as part of which Zimmerman vented his frustration is a gallery of anxiety. Indeed, Zimmerman (2004) reveals that each paper in it is born of the author's dissatisfaction with technological limitations, the level of sophistication in the industry, the lack of coherent critical theory, etc.

Game studies is a new field compared to narratology, and so is the latter new compared to e.g. literary studies. That in a convergence of two emerging

fields who gets to study and how the intellectual turf is disputed should come as no surprise. It was not so long ago that a similar situation occurred around cinema studies. Scholars in more established disciplines naturally attempt to understand new phenomena in ways to which they are used to. Conversely, scholars drawn to a fresher discipline take this for condescension, appropriation, or just plain missing the point (Bizzocchi, 2007).

Now that we know the state of the discourse we are participating in, we know how we must proceed in our spelunking. We need a definition of *game* and an understanding of *narrative* that can celebrate matrimony. In the following chapters it is my hope that, by explicating the terms used and the point of view taken as well as by training our mental acumen to a neglected type of game, we will gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between game and story.

2.2 What is it with games?

So what is it about games that is allegedly not compatible with narrative? According to Jenkins (2004), the issue seems to lie in this dichotomy: The player's participation poses a threat to narrative construction, while the rails of plot pose a threat to the player's participation. This tension between performance and exposition is not unique to games, yet gag sequences or action scenes are not perceived as threats to the plot of a film. Rather, though we might watch a kung-fu movie primarily to see martial artists flaunt their talents, we also expect them to fall back on some broad narrative framework that makes sense of localized action. There is a balancing act between how much plot and plot development is needed to create a compelling framework and how much time and space is allotted to performance without totally derailing the narrative. This very same balancing act is experienced by game designers, the performance portion being something the player engages in (124-126).

2.2.1 But what's a game?

To get to what games are, we'll need to descend through *play*, a concept associated with a plethora of phenomena. According to Zimmerman (2004), we use the term to denote the focused or formal kind of activity where players play a game. Play can

also refer to what may be called *ludic activities*, or behavior that is playing but not playing a game. This includes dogs chasing each other, guys tossing a frisbee back and forth or tickling. Ludic activities can be reminiscent of games, such as hide and seek, but are less formalized. They may also be very much not games, such as tickling. A third type of play is being in a playful state of mind. To be playful one does not need to be playing, but to just inject the spirit of play into something that is otherwise not playing. These three levels of play form a matryoshka doll, where the first of the above levels is nestled within the within the second, and the second within the third. Playing a game is a special ludic activity, and all ludic activities spring out of a playful state of mind (Zimmerman 2004).

Corralling all these uses in one pen of a definition requires that it be big and spacious. We can say that play is the space of free movement within more rigid confines (Zimmerman 2004). It is the leeway that exists despite the rigidity and as a necessity because of it. This way, conceived of as a relationship between the parts of a system, play can cover all the meanings given to it. Consider the outermost matryoshka doll: Implicit and explicit social agreements of what is and what is not acceptable behavior within the system that is my marital relationship enable me to inject a sense of play into tickling my wife, an offense which, were it committed by anyone else, would be nothing short of harassment. Similarly, the formality of a business meeting enables even worn linguistic quips – small and unelaborate enough to not derail the meeting – to relieve the pressure inherent in the social situation. Now consider the middle matryoshka: Playing the saxophone is a ludic activity in which the player operates within the audio possibilities of the instrument. The sounds it was built to produce or can be used to produce, possibly along with the musical notation observed, form the confines within which the player freely manipulates pitch, tone and tempo, and perhaps breaks through the constrictors into jazz.

With the second layer we could already detect what is the principal source of play in the systems that make up the outer layer of our concept: people. Formal game play occurs within the confines of game rules enabling play, but the rules are not play without the player trying to mend them to his will, trying to find an edge over his opponents. Play as the space of free movement within a system manifests only through an agent exploiting that space. What is of particular interest to us here is that special type of ludic activity – the game – and what play in

conjunction with a game is. The concept of game play could thus be expressed as follows: game play is player action within the boundaries set by the game rules and materials.

This observation is critical to how play and narrative link together in games. The potential for play must be designed into the narrative experience. This is, no doubt, a tremendous challenge for creators of narrative. The narrative must be prepared with the full variety of what another human mind can come up with while engaging with the narrative. There can be no sleight of ‘scripted play’ either. If the interaction between player and narrative is predetermined, there is no leeway, no play in the system. The structure of a game can guide and encourage play, but it can never make all the decisions in advance.

We’ve already established games as a subtype of ludic activity, but what exactly separates games from other kind of ludic activities? While the concept of play needed to be kept open to account for the variety of uses we have for the term, it follows that, being a type of the former, the concept of game should have clearer boundaries. We can, in fact, narrow games down to a concrete description while still maintaining an inclusive concept.

Zimmerman (2004) defines games as voluntary interactive activity in which one or more players submit themselves to constraints on their behavior willfully, acting out an artificial conflict ending in a quantifiable outcome. This dense description distinguishes games in six elements from other ludic activity, the keywords being *voluntary*, *interactive*, *behavior constraining*, *artificial*, *conflict* and *quantifiable outcome*. Below we will examine these in more detail. Let’s start with interaction.

Zimmerman (2004) recommends understanding interactivity not as a singular phenomenon but as a concept that can combine with a narrative experience in various ways. Building on a common dictionary definition of *interactive* as reciprocal action or two-way influence, he presents four modes of interaction with narrative. The modes are not distinct categories of interactive narrative but four levels of participation. They overlap, occurring sometimes all together, sometimes just one or two at a time.

Per Zimmerman (2004), the first mode is cognitive interaction or, in other words, interpretive participation with a narrative: thinking and rethinking about what one reads or sees. For example, to see a movie once and come back to it years later only to find it entirely different from how you remember it is interaction with the movie in your mind. The second mode is functional interaction or, in other words, utilitarian participation with a narrative: lifting up a book, pressing 'play' on a DVD-player, and any other structural contact with material apparatus of the narrative. The third mode is explicit interaction or, in other words, participation with choices and procedures in a narrative: clicking links in a text, following the rules of a board game, picking an option in video game. These are procedures and choices programmed into the narrative experience. The fourth mode is meta-interactivity or, in other words, cultural participation: conversing with others who have interacted with a game or a book, turning a text from one medium to another, etc. (Zimmerman, 2004).

Ludic activities which are forced upon someone are not games (Zimmerman, 2004). Throwing a frisbee at an unwilling, even unaware receiver is ludic action where some participants are not volunteering their time. The interaction must be voluntary, and the interaction referred to is that of the third mode described above: It is not ultimately necessary for willful participants to engage in interpretative participation with the game, thinking back to what they read, saw or heard during a session and altering their mental image of a game through further experiences with it. Neither is it strictly necessary for them to engage in utilitarian participation, using their limbs for moving objects, nor in cultural participation, communicating with fellow gamers about their gaming experiences. What is necessary interaction in games is explicit interaction – participation with choices and procedures. Our volunteers must engage in shaping the course the game takes. Though they would not think back to it, would not lift a finger during it, would not talk about it with anyone afterward, they need to be present there and then to give their input for it to be a game. Though you were a volunteer, just going through the motions, so to speak, or just acting out commands from another without your own input, you would not be playing a game.

In games, voluntary interaction of the third kind is also hemmed in by rules consented to (Zimmerman, 2004). This is common to ludic activities, as has

been suggested earlier. Sticking with the frisbee example, consider the constraints that ludic activity carries. It stops being a game when one participant chucks the disc, owned by the other guy not throwing it at that moment, into a lake on purpose. In short and profane terms, being a dick is not part of that ludic activity. Social constraints such as this are typically unspoken in ludic activities (Zimmerman, 2004). Before I tickle my wife, we do not sit down to discuss what limits there are to my action for it to remain playful. But in games, rules are often, though not always, fully disclosed. It is no fun if someone starts tag before everyone is on the same page about tag-backs, bases, truces, freezes, free-ups and so on. We've all been that kid. Prior to playing board games there usually is a booklet of explicit rules to read and get through to each participant. Sometimes video games have explicit conditions for performance as well, though often the limits of what you can do in game are found by trial and error; hitting a button and seeing something – or nothing – happen.

Per Zimmerman (2004), behavior-constraining rules go hand in hand with artificiality. They limit how the participants can interact. This produces a situation in which a participant may not have the option of acting in the way they intuitively would, causing behavior that would not otherwise come about – that is, in a word, artificial. Consider *Werewolf*, *Bang* or *Mafia*: in these games participants are assigned roles that are in opposition to each other, but which cannot attain their goals alone. It is therefore necessary for players to coax others to do their bidding. As such, in these games it may be necessary for participants to be untruthful about their assigned role. They have willingly submitted to a situation where they may need to be uncharacteristic bastards and lie to their friends. The playful setting, while constraining behavior, also enables players to behave to their friends in a way not usually acceptable (Zimmerman, 2004). Were it not part of the game, such behavior might cause severe strain on personal relationships. But because it is part of the game, the behavior is simply laughed off.

Another element that may be conceived of as artificial is the conflict inherent in games (Zimmerman, 2004). Whether street hoops, a single player digital experience or a game show on TV, the willing participants, though they might not harbor any ill will toward each other, are placed at odds with each other and/or the environment. It is a contest of powers, whether physical as in weightlifting, mental as in chess, or luck as in Yahtzee, or a mix thereof. Finally, this conflict in a

game must come to an end result (Zimmerman, 2004), and this is the quantifiable outcome, the last element of the dense definition we began unpacking two pages ago. Some games end when a specific state is reached in the game, or a certain score attained, or once an amount of time has elapsed. In some games there are winners, in others points are simply tallied and performances ranked accordingly. This last element, the quantifiable outcome, is what necessitates more form than is found in other ludic activities, and is what most clearly separates games unto themselves. Hide and seek, as I at least have usually played it, does not have a winner or a specific end condition. But make it so that whoever is found last wins, and the game is on.

To sum up, to play a game is a choice. What follows is gameplay, that is to say continuing to make choices following artificial limitations toward an end capable of being measured. Play is free movement within constraints, and the rules of a game designate the space for play. Without the formal limits there would be no form within which to lark freely. Rules are fixed, but game play is creative and improvisational. It is impossible to divorce game from gamer, in that there is no play without a player. This, as shall be demonstrated in chapter 5, is the case with story in games as well.

2.2.2 Computer games and board games – is there a meaningful difference?

Until now, we have considered games on the whole, of any kind. This general, top-level perspective has served as a potent thruster for this study. We are now able to continue our journey removed from it; it is time to jettison it and focus on board games. As the studies and papers referred to so far have, by and large, primarily to do with video games, we must now turn to what distinguishes board games from games in general and video games in particular to proceed.

Designing a game is to a large extent designing spaces. This is true whether designing for screen or table, with narrative in mind or not. Entertaining gameplay requires space both navigable and evocative enough for the purpose of the game. Enabling the creation of more and more potent game spaces has evidently been the focus of a majority of the development of video games and related

technology over the years: putting video games from the past four decades side by side makes it clear that digital worlds have continually increased in scope, detail and dimension.

In this respect, games that tell a story are part of a tradition of “spatial stories” (Jenkins, 2004). The hero odysseys and travel narratives of Tolkien, Verne and Baum fit within this category as works that take pains to paint in the mind of the reader a complete world, vaster than what the reader experiences.

According to Jenkins (2004), environmental storytelling – i.e. telling or reinforcing stories through the environment – erects the necessary surroundings for a narrative experience that is immersive. It is a term used by amusement park designers, and is appropriate for our use here. The purpose of the amusement park environment is analogous to the purpose of video game graphics and that of board game pieces and their imagery. Each part of that environment either reinforces the story and the setting or is liable to shatter the illusion (Jenkins, 2004).

Per Jenkins (2004: 123), the space or environment of a story creates an illusion of a world as tangible as ours through at least one of four ways: It evokes prior narrative associations. It provides a stage where narrative events are enacted. It may carry narrative information through the *mise-en-scène* – the physical setting (i.e. an arrow identifying a treasure, town or bad guy). It may provide resources for emergent narrative (thing for the entertainees to play with and tell a story for themselves) (Jenkins, 2004: 123).

Amusement parks and board games are alike in that they do not tell self-contained stories so much as draw upon our narrative competence – the sum of our previous narrative experiences and our ability to extrapolate and apply from them. They sketch the broad outlines and trust the visitor or player to color in the rest. This is distinct from many video games, especially where video games try to be more like movies, in that video games and movies would both tell more self-contained stories, leaving less to the imagination.

In contrast, video games have better potential for spatial immersion. Many current computer games are able to present a visually very detailed setting, with potentially infinite elements, whereas a board game is limited to what is

possible to represent on a table. For example, presenting an army of one hundred thousand troops individually is not possible in a board game without losing usability, nor are very great differences in representing character size, facial characteristics, movement fidelity, etc. In fact, Murray (1997, 109) states that spatial immersion at this depth can inhibit immersion in the story of a game.

The face-to-face presence of other players in a board game session is an immediate distinction from video games, but the effect it has to the game is difficult to quantify. I have been unsuccessful in finding a study on this, and as such am limited to conjecture. It is at least clear that physical signals are available to board game players but not to video game players. You could literally punch someone in the face in a board game session, but you cannot punch someone in a single-player or multi-player video game with your fist. Neither can we feel any benevolent, kind interaction digitally, such as a hug. Though some multi-player video games enable voice communication, the fast pace of photonic feedback from a computer screen distracts players from engaging in discussion beyond what is necessary. Conversely, bar a minority of board games operating in real time, there is nothing in a board game to prevent players from conversing as much as they like. Similarly, facial expressions and tone of voice are important in games that feature bluffing.

We may surmise that the immediate physical and mental presence of other players enables a deeper dimension of emotional immersion in a game. It is of course possible for a player to become emotionally vested in their character, creation or performance in a video game. But the ability to utilize conventional, non-digital communication in playing a board game connects players outside the game and in the game. No emotional anonymity is possible at a board game table – or no more than you might have at the dinner table. What then does this difference mean in terms of the narrative potential of video and board games? As far as they impact immersion and the palatability of the story, the role of the game pieces (or data components, in digital terms) is heightened in a video game whereas the role of other players is heightened in board games. If something in the visual representation of a video game world is off, it is harder to overlook than in a board game because a digitally represented world creates more possibility for detail and that possibility begets expectation. While other players can influence the way you experience a story in a

multiplayer game, fellow board gamers can add to one's immersion or take from it not only through gameplay but also with verbal, facial and gesticulative exposition.

2.3 At the intersection of narrative and interaction

So what is about previous conceptualizations of narrative that makes them ill-disposed toward games? At the heart of this tension is player agency. According to Meister (2014), early 20th century scholars sought to reduce narratives to basic principles. Operating on literary narratives, Propp identified a narrative structure that featured rigid sequences of cause and effect, character relationships and character interactions. Later in the century, "story grammars" would be built on Propp's notions in the vein of Chomskian generative grammar (Meister, 2014). Because player agency could at any moment disrupt this structure, the only way to maintain narrative form is to remove or severely limit the player's ability to affect it. This was considered antithetical to games, as eliminating agency sets the player on a predetermined path (Stern and Mateas, 2005, pp. 2-3).

Moving through Russian formalism as Meister (2014) is our guide, in the heyday of French structuralism (the middle decades of the 20th century) narratology became established as a discipline. It sought methodological coherence with a focus on structural formula. Many methodologies were devised, the most notable perhaps by Barthes and Genette, who maintained that narratology should not limit itself to literature when devising systematic categorizations. Their message was heard later by poststructuralist scholars like Chatman, who began to truly widen their scope beyond literary narrative. It was natural to try structuralist tools to media other than literature, but though structuralist and formalist schemata did not limit themselves to literature in principle, the explosion of then-new media revealed that old-school tools were unprepared to accommodate more than literature (Meister, 2014).

We're tuning now to hear Herman (2009). Enter cognitive narratology, a subheading under post-classical narratology. It expands on the work of classical narratologists such as Barthes, Genette and Todorov with concepts and methods unavailable to them. Research methods employed draw from linguistics, computer sciences, philosophy and psychology, to name a few, in addition to narratology. With

this rich interdisciplinary background, cognitive narratology can presently not be narrowed down to more than a loose confederacy of heuristics for studying mind-relevant aspects of stories and storytelling. Objects falling under the broad purview of cognitive narratology include computer-mediated texts, blogs, graphic novels, cinema, oral tradition, conversation, etc. The nexus of story and mind can be clearly perceived in the creation of stories as well as in their transmission and interpretation. Mind-relevance can be studied in how authors design narratives, how storytellers re-produce and re-present narratives, and how and why interpreters make sense of narrative representations and artifacts (Herman, 2009, pp. 30-31).

The core questions of this study fall right under the third way of studying the intersection of stories and minds Herman (2009) mentioned above. What cognitive processes support narrative understanding, allowing mental reconstruction of worlds evoked by stories? How do interpreters of narratives or narrative designers use medium-specific cues to build a chronology for events, a broader temporal and spatial environment for those events, an inventory of characters involved, and what it was like for these characters to experience the world? These kinds of questions were unlikely to be put forth let alone addressed within classical narrative frameworks. When earlier structuralist models were introduced to disciplines focalizing the mind the synergy produced cognitive narratology (Herman, 2009, 31-32).

What makes a cognitive approach to narrative more relatable to games than a textual approach is the loosening of the internal connections between various aspects of narratives. Where prior approaches might be said to observe narrative as a textual feature, cognitive approaches may be said to observe narrative as a mental feature. In this light, a story is more of a body of information than a temporal structure. Precise information on the order of events may be a part of that body, but it need not be. Narrative comprehension is then a process through which viewers, players and readers use the information provided to draw a linear trajectory of events, even projecting it into the future with their expectations of likely narrative developments, reformulating their understanding of the narrative and the story space as the show goes on.

2.3.1 Narrative and narrativity – definitive cleft

To put section 2.3 in other words, there are and have been a number of ways to look at narratives, as illustrated by Ryan (2004): An existential understanding of narrative seeks to capture what it means for us to produce and receive narratives. It says the act of narrating enables us to give meaning to life by situating us among our peers, creating and projecting identities and coping with time and mortality. A cognitive perspective on narrative seeks to capture the operations of the narrating mind. It says narrative imagining is a mode of thinking, perhaps even synonymous with thinking. An aesthetic understanding of narrative, at the extreme, posits that narrativity cannot be isolated from a text as a whole, being much too bound to the “verbal fabric” of a text. A sociological approach to narrative focuses not on narrative as text but on the performing of narration – a contextually bound practice. A catchall category called, for the lack of a better description, technical approaches looks at narrative variously as a discourse theoretical concept: whether as a speech act (alongside commands and questions), genre (i.e. a criterion to define a typology) or a part of speech (Ryan 2004, 2-6).

The spread of focuses and cacophony of definitions for narrative in these categories is evidence of how many different levels narration operates on. On the macro-level, narrative transcends text type: were you to ask help finding the narrative shelf at a book store no single department would suffice as an answer. On the micro-level, it is intuitive to propose that some sentences in a book carry the plot forward more than others (Ryan 2004, 7).

According to Ryan (2004), whichever of the above approaches have been taken to situate narrative in a system the same difficulty has always come up: The other elements of that system can't be positively identified. Our intuition may be clear as to what narration is, but we can't put a finger on what it stands in contrast to. Thus a program of defining linguistic units through differentiation á la Saussure fails – no identifiable neighbors, no differentiation (Ryan 2004, 8)!

Ryan (2004) proposes to approach narrative primarily as a type of meaning rather than as a linguistic paradigm. She does not deny that a narrative involves both something that is signified and something that enables the signification, but posits that in order to define narrative it is best to look at the level

of the signified. Her view might then belong in the category of technical approaches to narrative. However, instead of attempting to connect narrative meaning to a particular discourse theoretical concept (e.g. a sentence), she understands narrative meaning as a mental image that the interpreter constructs in response to a text (2004: 8).

Ryan (2004: 8-9) suggests three criteria that the representation conjured in the mind of the interpreter needs to fulfill for it to qualify as a narrative:

1. A narrative text must create a world and populate it with characters and objects. Logically speaking, this condition means that the narrative text is based on propositions asserting the existence of individuals and on propositions ascribing properties to these existents.
2. The world referred to by the text must undergo changes of state that are caused by nonhabitual physical events: either accidents (“happenings”) or deliberate human actions. These changes create a temporal dimension and place the narrative world in the flux of history.
3. The text must allow the reconstruction of an interpretive network of goals, plans, causal relations, and psychological motivations around the narrated events. This implicit network gives coherence and intelligibility to the physical events and turns them into a plot.

Per Ryan (2004), a text that meets these conditions creates a narrative script. This definition of narrative does not concern itself with why the interpreter would want to piece the narrative together: whether the narrative is compelling to the interpreter or not, it is still a narrative. The dual nature of this definition of narrative ties a physical, representational plane to a cognitive plane. On the one hand, narrative is a particular type of textual meaning, and on the other hand, it is a cognitive construct. We need to understand *text* broadly here. The signs used to encode narrative meaning may be anything from letters on a page to lines on a canvas, a still photo or motion set to music. Similarly, the mental image the interpreter constructs may be induced by stimuli from any and all senses (Ryan 2004, 9).

What this dual definition enables is encompassing narrative as something that is in an object or in the mind. For us to create narrative as a mental construct does not require a representation intended as narrative: life may trigger

narratives in our mind, despite life not being a representation. It appears then that there are two modal levels here, according to Ryan (2004). She calls them, on the one hand, *being narrative* and, on the other hand, *having some degree of narrativity*. Any semiotic object that is intended to produce mental images of a populated, changing world with a network of goals, plans and causal relations is a narrative. It is a sign or a series of signs that conveys specific meanings meant to entice the imagination of the receiver in a particular direction. While a bunch of signs is narrative if it is intended as such, narrativity refers to the ability of signs to entice the imagination. Anything that is able to evoke in the mind of the interpreter a populated, changing world with a network of goals, plans and causal relations has narrativity (Ryan 2004, 9).

This distinction allows for the dissociation of these two levels: A narrative does not necessarily possess a high degree of narrativity (Ryan 2004, 9-10). Imagine a movie that does not make sense, and there you have it. You've seen it. Inversely, a non-narrative phenomenon can have high narrativity if it evokes in the mind of the interpreter a series of meanings (Ryan 2004, 9-10). Imagine waking up late one day and rushing for the bus, only to have it pass you by despite your mad flailing. Would you say that this indicates you'll have a bad day, that the unknown bus driver has something personal against you, or that you should not have gotten up in the first place? If you would, the event has narrativity, though others might suggest it was an accident. Notice that being narrative requires the signification to be intentional – in the above example, you could not simultaneously regard the bus ignoring you a narrative and an accident. Notice also that the property of being narrative is binary – on or off – whereas the property of having narrativity operates on a scale.

It follows that even a disconnected series of images can have narrativity if the observer comes up with the logical connections needed to make sense of the images as a set (Ryan 2004, 11). While written text is arguably the most capable of semiotic codes in explicating causal relations, this edge over others is typically used with refrain. While picture and sound may be less capable in transmitting motives and explicit logical sequences, writers refrain from taking their semiotic code of choice to its fullest in this sense. They leave something for the reader to fill in, as per the reputed words of George Orwell: “Good writing is like a windowpane.” For a

text, written or otherwise, to be narrative or to have narrativity, it does not need to make goals, plans, motivations and causal relations explicit. It only needs to allow for the reconstruction of those relations as a mental image (Ryan 2004, 9-11).

2.3.2 *Five distinctions – modes of narrative evocation*

So theoretically narrative is a type of meaning not tied to a particular medium. In practice, however, narrative has a medium of choice: language. This can be seen in how narratology has tended to regard narrative in novels and conversation storytelling as the normal manifestation of narrativity. If there is to be a theory of narrative that is not limited to specific media, modes of evoking mental images other than language need to be determined. To explain what she means by *modes* in this context, Ryan (2004) proposes an open list of five distinctions. The first item in each distinctive pair is the usual or unmarked one, meaning that the narrative mode it describes is more likely accepted as narrative by theorists than the latter (Ryan, 2004: 13). These five distinctions will be useful in analyzing the board game *Betrayal at House on the Hill* for narrativity and discussing the same. They will be used to describe of the kind of narrativity it may be said to have.

The first distinction Ryan (2004) makes is between *diegetic* and *mimetic* narration. Diegetic narration is the typical mode found in novels, conversational storytelling and news report. It is the verbal act of storytelling by a narrator and as such presupposes either oral or written language. Mimetic narration is an act of showing. This mode of narrations is typical of movies, theater, dance and the opera. Diegetic and mimetic narration can mingle. Voice-over narration in a film introduces a bit of diegetic narration in an otherwise mimetic medium, whereas dialogues in a novel are mimetic bits within an otherwise diegetic medium (Ryan, 2004, 13).

In that last example, the narrator disappears behind the voice of the direct quote, and in this sense Ryan (2004) thinks that dialogue is showing, not telling. Theorists who require that a narrative have a storyteller who performs a verbal act accept mimetic narrative through imagining a ghost-like narrator figure behind the scenes. Another way to bridge the two modes is by regarding mimetic narrative as virtual telling. When a play, a mimetic medium, is retold in words, a

diegetic narrative is produced. The possibility of doing this would constitute narrativity, whether or not it is actualized. (Ryan, 2004, 13-14)

The second distinction Ryan (2004) makes is between *autonomous* and *illustrative*. In the autonomous mode the story transmitted is new to the receiver, meaning that logical relations must be retrievable from the text. In the illustrative mode a story is retold and complemented, meaning that the receiver must have previous knowledge of how the story goes (Ryan, 2004, 14). In a sense, an illustrative narrative might be viewed as a 'corruption' of an autonomous narrative. For example, were the story of Little Red Riding Hood recounted so that major parts are glossed over to get to freshly imagined juice twist, the narrative would be illustrative. That is, to get it completely the receiver should know course of the original.

The third distinction Ryan (2004) makes is between *receptive* and *participatory*. In the first, the receiver is not actively a part of the events of the narrative. In the latter, the recipient takes an active part in the story, contributing to how it pans out. This mode has been around in improvisation theater, but has gained significant ground in tabletop role playing games and video games (Ryan, 2004, 14).

The fourth distinction Ryan (2004) makes is between *determinate* and *indeterminate*. Imagine narrative as a trajectory passing through points in space. In the first, determinate, the text provides enough points that the narrative trajectory is reasonably definite. In the latter, indeterminate, the interpreter needs to imagine how the narrative trajectory travels to pass through the limited coordinates provided by the text. An indeterminate narrative might provide a more or less loose collection of likely related events but leave out the specific order of things (Ryan, 2004, 14). A book written in the style of journal excerpts from dates that are not concurrent could be an example of an indeterminate narrative, as opposed to, at the other extreme, a story told in the style of a captain's log.

The fifth distinction Ryan (2004) makes is between *literal* and *metaphorical*. Whatever the definition of a narrative, a literal narration fulfills the definition entirely whereas a metaphorical narrative uses only some of the defining features. The degree of narrative metaphoricity thus depends on the number of features retained or glossed and the weight of those features to the definition of

narrative. If narrative is conceived of as a mental or textual representation of causally linked events involving humanlike, distinguishable agents, then the following are metaphorical because they do not satisfy the humanlike agent criterion: scenarios about collective, e.g. the grand narratives of history; scenarios about entities lacking consciousness, e.g. Darwin's story of evolution; scenarios where agency is attributed to abstract objects, e.g. discussions of mathematical relationships (Ryan, 2004, 14-15).

2.4 Games and narrative

Not all games attempt to tell stories. Many games, such as backgammon, make no attempt to color the game board and playing pieces as representing something more than their immediate position-denoting function. In this respect, games as a genre are closer to dance, for example, than film (Jenkins, 2004). There are ballets, such as *The Nutcracker*, that wish to tell a story, but narrative is not an intrinsic feature of dance as a medium.

Many games, on the other hand, have narrative aspirations. The very least some games try to do is stoke the "emotional residue" that has been left over from our previous experiences with stories (Jenkins, 2004). This is what movie tie-in products do in general: A *Toy Story 3* mug is more attractive to a child than a plain one because of the positive emotional response he has had to Woody or Buzz. Conversely, a custom printed cup with his teacher's mug on it is not.

There are a lot of games languishing at this bare minimum level of 'narrative' aspiration (often with a maximum level of monetary aspiration). Consider, for example, *The Hobbit Scrabble* or *Yahtzee: The Desolation of Smaug*. Both of these titles have replicated a previous game (*Scrabble* and *Yahtzee*, respectively) both in mechanisms, pieces and name, but with a little something added to connect in the player's mind the game experience and the movie. *The Hobbit Scrabble* gives players bonus points for scoring words related to the film, rewarding players for actively delving into their memory of the cinematic experience. *Yahtzee: The Desolation of Smaug* does not make a minute addition to its basic formula in this way, instead opting for a cosmetic addition in the form of a marvelous plastic goblet purporting to resemble the one Bilbo burgled. Its purpose? For you to roll dice with

for as long as it makes Yahtzee more enjoyable to play while liberally quoting from the movie.

There are, however, also games aspiring for more than just calling up memories. In light of Ryan's (2004) conceptually clefting narrative and narrativity, we may state that if a game is *intended* to produce mental images of a populated, changing world with a network of goals, plans and causal relations, it qualifies as a narrative. It may do so poorly – or it may do so well – but the key is that it has been conceived of with the express purpose of fulfilling that conditional trio. What is not dependent on intention is the narrativity of a game, a quality which a game will be deemed to have later in this study if it allows players to fulfill the conditional trio in their heads of their own accord.

How, then, do board games pass on the fodder required to feed the imagination with these mental images? Games can signify in ways other narrative forms do: through sound and image, material and text, movement and space. There is, however, a layer inseparable from games rarely appended to other narrative forms: interactive formal play. Play itself is not a semiotic object. Neither is a player. But the players become co-signifiers with the game, adding the full range of human expression to the capacity of the board game's signifiers. Some games rely heavily on this, requiring players to 'storytell' their actions, to self-narrate what they do.

It is important to note that the story of a game does not necessarily produce the pleasures a novel or film would, but should we expect it to? If we are able to view ballet and novel as both telling a story in their own ways, and to enjoy both for how they do it, then games should not be bereft of our understanding. It follows that games should be studied for narrative pleasures they are able to provide that novels and films cannot. And now I will do so.

3 Method and material

In this part I explain the type of research done, how it was conducted, the why of the how as well as what limits the how. I will also provide a concise explanation of how the game observed, *Betrayal at House on the Hill*, is played and what it is about.

As this study is based on the notion of narrative as a cognitive construct, to ascertain the narrative potential in board games we will need to tap into the mind of people experiencing them. The precise focus is how the mental image of narrative is formed in the interaction between a player and the game. Hence, we are looking at a phenomenon formed in the mind and possibly exhibited physically and verbally to fellow players. Because the presence of other players is intrinsic to the board game experience, I cannot accept to sit down with a game in front of me by attempting to play out the moves of others myself. In addition, since I would know prior to playing what criteria need to be met for a game to have narrative, I would likely put more effort into imagining – forming that mental image that constitutes narrativity – than I would otherwise. I will need volunteers to play for me. The ultimate discoveries will be an amalgamation of the understandings of the researcher and of willing participants.

To study the phenomenon of cognitive story formation it is necessary to cross-pollinate our narratological foundation with research methods more common in sociology and psychology. An entirely questionnaire-based approach was tested at first, but more depth in the probing was deemed necessary. Even should questionnaires have been tailored for each game, this would have been too restrictive, as the twists and turns, outcomes and interpretations of game sessions are so varied. The positivist assumption that questions asked make uniform sense to the participants was also found untenable, and a dialogue between research instrument and respondent was necessary.

The method of choice is, then, the semi-structured interview with participant observation. “Semi-structured” means that interview questions are not decided beforehand. Instead I will come up with the questions as I observe the gameplay. An interview allows me, the data-gathering instrument, to move fluidly among what the participants tell me and to ask for clarification and explanation where necessary. It provides the interviewee with the time and scope to talk and reflect toward nuanced responses. The positive rapport of a conversational situation paves the way for discussing emotions that a narrative may cause. The ability to talk freely is good for data validity as well, provided that the interview is structured so that prompts and questions thought of in advance do not prematurely judge responses (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

The underlying philosophy to qualitative research ultimately taken is of the naturalistic department, interpretive constructionist division. Naturalistic qualitative research means that, as per Rubin and Rubin (2005), in contrast to the positivist paradigm, participants are not presupposed to have a roughly uniformly shared understanding of anything. It is not assumed that the concepts central to this research and the questions asked of the participants make uniform sense to interviewees. Not only is the humanity of the interviewees highlighted, but so is that of the researcher. It is not possible for the researcher to not affect what is learned through this study. That is not to say that I mean to skew data to fit a desired interpretation, but rather the opposite. Recognizing myself as a factor in the validity of this study, I make no pretense of finding unconditional truths about my subject while making the contingent definitions and background clear.

Following Rubin & Rubin (2005), interpretive constructionism means that what is of primary importance to this study is how people view narratives and games and what meaning they attribute to their interchange. In conjunction with the naturalistic foundation, it is expected that participants should begin with distinct understandings and come to different conclusions. In this sense it is possible for conflicting versions of events and multiple perceptions of narrative components to be true at the same time. They are borne out of different experiences, knowledge and views, or what may be called culture. The researcher also has a set of cultural lenses, but it is not necessary for him to drop them in an effort to assume the lenses of the interviewee. Interviewers simply need to be cautious so as not to take for granted shared understandings or any knowledge or view the interviewee might hold (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

The raw data then is the interview material and the gameplay observation, both of which were analyzed qualitatively. It is not necessary to convert responses into numbers for quantitative analysis as I am not strictly interested in the specific number of players, for example, who discover a narrative in the game. With a small sample size we obtain a more detailed set of mental images from players that will tell us whether they were able to imagine a living game world. Analyzing the gameplay I look for and listen for verbal and physical reactions which indicate that the imagination is at work. Analyzing the responses I will listen for responses that

suggest that the game played has narrativity and that describe how the narrativity was manifest.

So the play session was recorded on video to capture any salient player interactions as well as to enable the comparison of player recollection and actual session progression. A video camera was placed so that the players and the game table were both in view, and so that all speech could clearly be heard on the recording. The recording along with my notes was used to track the progression of the game, and the description of gameplay in the analysis is essentially a distilled report of what can be seen on the video.

To avert data loss to imperfect recall, participants were interviewed immediately following the game session. The players were interviewed as a group, more because of time constraints than anything else. The interview took 75 minutes. Everyone was allowed to chime in on anything they felt they wanted to respond to. Some questions were fielded openly to everyone, while some were directed at particular participants. Questions were used as a prompts to keep the discussion on the right track, but as long as the interviewees were talking about something in line with the topic they were given free range.

In emulation of Ryan's (2004) definition of narrative, the point of the post-session interview was to determine the following:

- a) Have the players formed a cognitive image of a world populated with characters and objects (i.e. has the game asserted the existence of individuals and proposed properties on them)?
- b) Has the world they picture in their minds undergone changes by accident or by deliberate human action (i.e. does the game posit a temporally ordered dimension)?
- c) Has the game allowed the players to reconstruct in their minds a network of goals, plans, causal relations and psychological motivations around events (i.e. do physical actions on the game space become more than the transportation of concrete objects from one position to another)?

These three questions formed the three themes of the interview. The specific questions asked were formed while observing the participants play the game and in response to what the interviewees had to say. As the players' language of choice was primarily Finnish, the interview was conducted in Finnish. As such all direct quotes from participants are translated by me.

The game session was held at the home of a willing participant. As the players were all speakers of primarily Finnish, the game was played in Finnish. The game materials themselves, however, were all in English, and English was spoken by the players at times. Prior to the session and before the game began participants were told only that I would be observing them and that the study has to do with board games.

Betrayal at House on the Hill was selected based on the following criteria: For convenience, the game chosen had to come from either my shelf or that of a personal acquaintance. The game needed to be playable in an evening and to fit at least four players, to feature varied gameplay dynamics and to claim to tell a story. Last but not least, the game needed to be available for my use in English. *Betrayal* is just such a game, accommodating between three to six players and taking between half an evening to a full evening from start to finish. It has tremendous variety on top of quite simple mechanisms, and it does indeed hope to convey a story.

Players were selected on both a convenience and self-selection sampling basis. This non-probability sampling was deemed enough for the present study, as the aim is not quantification but description. To this end, any players who were able to make it to the game session and who were willing to stay for the interview and to have their participation recorded on video were accepted. Players attained through convenience sampling were personal acquaintances, and players attained through self-selection sampling were volunteers responding to a call put out on the online forums of the Finnish Board Game Society (<http://www.lautapeliseura.fi/foorumi>). Both samplings produced players with at least some experience of hobby board games, which was desirable in order to lessen the time required for clarifying game rules.

3.1 *Betrayal at House on the Hill*

Here I will attempt to give a brief description of the setting and pieces of *Betrayal at House on the Hill*, the second edition of which was published by Avalon Hill and Wizards of the Coast in 2010. The purpose of this is for you, the reader, to better picture what is going on in the gameplay analysis. For the same purpose I also provide an outline of how the game goes and the terms used in the game. The same terms will be used in the gameplay analysis. The subchapter has photos of the game components at the end. When game pieces are referred to in the text in this subchapter, there will be a number that corresponds to a sample piece in the photos.

In *Betrayal*, players explore a mansion or haunted house that is different in each game. Each player is one character of a party of explorers who at first bumble around discovering the house until, at a certain point of the game, one of the party betrays the others. There will then be one party of explorers and the traitor, with the house and possibly some evil minions on his side. At this point both sides will get goals they need to reach in order to win – and the goals of one side are not known to the other side. For the explorers, it may be to make it out alive, or to take out the traitor, or his minions, or to dispel the house of its curse completely, or something else entirely. For the traitor, it may be to take out the explorers, to open a portal to another world, to bring about the end of all things, or to enter rest with his beloved.

The game contains a deck of square room tiles (1), marked on the reverse side to indicate which floors – upper, ground, or basement – they can be placed at. Each tile represents one room, except for the starting corridor (2), which shows three rooms. Room tiles have between one to four doors, indicated by a yellow outline on the edge of the room tile. There are three sets of cards for Items, Events, and Omens (3). There are also six different character plates (4) with corresponding plastic figures (5), and an assortment of tokens to represent various creatures, items or mansion features (6). Each character plate has four trait meters that are used to track the character's current Might, Speed, Knowledge, and Sanity values. The game also includes six-sided dice that only have 0, 1, or 2 pips on each side.

Gameplay consists of two distinct phases: the initial exploration phase and the haunt phase. At the start of the game, each player selects a character (6) and sets the meters at their character-specific starting values. Their character figures (5) begin in the starting corridor (2). In the exploration phase, players take turns moving their character figures (5) from room to room (1), drawing cards when prompted. On each turn, a player may move through a number of rooms equivalent to their current Speed. If the player moves through a door where no room has been placed, he draws a room tile from the stack until they draw one that matches the current floor they are on. The tile is placed as best to match the current door layout of adjacent rooms – that, where possible, doors should not lead to nowhere.

If there is an Item, Event or Omen icon on the newly-placed tile, the player draws the respective card and follows its instructions. Drawing a card ends your chance to move, though you may still use any Items you can and trade Items with others in the same room. When entering rooms previously placed any card drawing icons are ignored. Some room tiles have specific instructions that must be followed when applicable (e.g. when moving out of the room).

Event cards often require the player to roll a number of dice equal to the value of a particular meter on their character plate. Depending on the roll, they may incur positive or negative effects, for example in the form of changes to their Might value. Item cards provide equipment the player can use, drop, and trade with other players. Omen cards may function as either type of card. What is special about Omen cards is that, after drawing one, the player must roll six dice, and if this roll is lower than the total number of Omen cards that have been drawn, the Haunt phase starts.

Once a player has triggered the Haunt phase, the players take out the Traitor's Tome, a book of fifty scenarios with special rules and goals for the traitor. The Traitor's Tome also contains a table where the players cross reference the last Omen card (3) drawn and the room (6) it was drawn in to come up with the scenario to be played out this time. The explorers also get a book – the Secrets of Survival – where they will find the corresponding scenario special rules and goals for themselves. The scenario-specific rules may alter any of the basic rules of the game, and as such a definitive outline of how the game goes is difficult to give. The traitor

leaves the explorers for a moment to allow them to make sure everyone is on board with whatever they need to do to win, and to mull on his own machinations for the same.

After the new information has been digested, the game continues as before, except that the explorers may now attack any creatures (1) that may come at them, and vice versa. When explorers attack and defeat creatures, the latter are generally only stunned and forced to skip a turn. When characters attack each other and when creatures attack characters, characters may be forced to move their trait meters down a number of steps depending on the combat results. Death (or equivalent) generally occurs when any one of the player's trait meters drops to the lowest position. Note that this only true after the Haunt has begun. Should an unfortunate series of Events cause one of a player's traits to drop to its lowest value before the Haunt, it only falls to the second lowest value and the character does not die. The game is over when either the explorers or the traitor achieve their goals.



Image 3.1.1 Sample game components



Image 3.1.2 Sample game components

4 Analysis

In this part I will analyze the gameplay video data and the post-game interview data. Keeping mind the distinction between narrative and narrativity, it must be said that I have to focus on the latter. Following Ryan's (2004) definition, any game that is intended to evoke a mental image of a living world as per her three criteria is a narrative. Since *Betrayal* does indeed claim to tell stories, what is left for me to do is to see how much narrativity there is to the game. If the players imagine a living world, the degree of narrativity is middling to high. If they do not the degree of narrativity is low to nonexistent. The analysis begins with a description of how the game went down. The description of gameplay is laced with excerpts of salient comments by the players betraying aspects of the mental processing going on. Gameplay is gone through turn by turn to allow for you, the reader, to judge for yourself whether you can picture a narrative. Most of the gameplay is also difficult to separate from the situations where the excerpts are from even if the gameplay does not directly bear on the exchange that follows. Additionally, the players refer back to the gameplay in the interview, so detailing it allows for the reader to go back to the moment the interviewees return to. In general there will be description of gameplay leading up to a quotable moment, then an excerpt of that moment, and then a bit of analysis of that excerpted moment. When an excerpt would not be feasible in

illustrating the collective imagination process, I will not provide one, sticking with just the gameplay description for analysis.

The excerpts are transcribed from the video footage and translated. Minimal speech-act information is related in lieu of the translated utterances. As the data is not meant for formal speech-act study but for illustrative purposes of what goes on in the players' heads, only select features are highlighted through the use of a transcription symbol system appropriated and modified based on Gail Jefferson, 2004. The transcription key is provided below. Keep in mind that the excerpts are snapshots of interesting speech amid almost constant banter about rules, pizza, life, etc. That is, the players talk about more than just what is analyzed here, but what is analyzed are the parts of the collective verbal current that serve to illustrate the players' imaginations.

for [shizzle!]	Indicates the start and end of	yeah (.) no	Utterance pauses
[totally]	overlapping speech, aligned to mark precise position	<u>Underlining</u>	Indicates stress via pitch or amplitude.
~~~	One or more comments are skipped at this point in the excerpt	<i>Italics</i>	Indicates speech in a language other than Finnish
st-stu-tter	Indicates cut-off speech or stutter	<doom>	Indicates an altered tone of voice
yeah.	Utterance ends	((facepalm))	Double parentheses contain pertinent non-verbal action

#### *Transcription key*

The initial gameplay analysis portion (4.1) is followed by an analysis of interview responses broken down into three categories: the game world and its inhabitants (4.2), the temporal dimension (4.3), and the psychological dimension (4.4). These three subchapters correspond to the three areas of interest, or three things I wanted to find out, as explained in Chapter 3. Throughout, players are referred to with a randomly assigned name to mask their identities. Considering that the game itself took more than double the length of the interview, and because more is going on during the game than during the interview, there is more to analyze in the gameplay footage and therefore section 4.1 is longer than the individual interview chapters.

#### 4.1 The game in session: *Betrayal at House on the Hill*

Because of the split nature of *Betrayal*, the Exploration phase (the first part of the game), will be easy and interesting to document exactly. As players were mostly moving from room to room, revealing new places within the mansion, the gameplay was easy to follow. The second part, the Haunt, is messier in part because the players will be moving through many already discovered rooms in a turn, and because of that the gameplay documentation will be less detailed toward the end. I will be referring to various rooms by name when they are revealed because the name is important fodder for the imagination, often critical to the excerpt that follows. As it would be impractical to provide a photo of each room tile, the room names will also serve to let anyone reading this form an image of the mansion for themselves. Room and card effects will only be detailed where necessary for narrative exposition. Furthermore, if the players do not regularly refer to their characters by the names the game gives them, neither will I do so in the text. Instead, I will use the names the players give their characters.

After rules explanation, as one of the players (Player Quinn) reviewed the finer points of the rules, the other four (Players Pete, Richard, Hannah and Jonah) began by introducing their characters to each other. First to go, Pete introduced his character through the inconsequential character information (or flavor text) on his character plate. Next, Richard introduced his character as though it were himself, referring to the characters traits as his own (Excerpt 4.1.1). He ignored the inconsequential character information on his character plate, but told the others his character's abilities and stats, which are pertinent to playing the game, ending on an evaluative remark. Other players, including Pete, quickly followed suit calling out their numerical traits (or stats, short for statistics).

P: "I have this little boy whose hobbies are bugs and baseball, and his date of birth is September 3rd. Mine is on the 6th of September, so."

R: "I can move four. Might is three. Sanity is five and knowledge is three. Pretty small numbers."

H: "I have three, two, six and four."

~~~

J: "I'm useful if we come across monsters."

Excerpt 4.1.1

While it is too early at this point of the game to say how deeply any of the players identify with their game character, a difference can be heard here. Pete, by his own account an infrequent gamer, refers to his character in the third person. Richard, by his own account a regular hobby gamer, refers to his character in the first person. This difference can't be chalked up to economy, as it takes practically no more effort to say "His Might is four" than "My Might is four". It can't yet be said whether Richard's choice of pronoun might be due to an imaginative disposition or habit. Should it be the former it is curious, however, that he calls out just the numbers important to gameplay and none of the flavor text, and also that he evaluates them in a rather analytical manner. Pete initially does the opposite, passing on just an item of flavor text about his character and none of the stats. A bit later, Jonah's words are like an amalgamation of Richard's and Pete's. Evaluating his character's high Might value, he appreciates the fact that it will be of use later. Note also his choice of the first person pronoun. It is already apparent that the game posits the existence of at least the players' characters and proposes that they have certain properties.

Hannah, going first, moves her character pawn upstairs. Jonah moves to discover the Game Room, whereupon he has to stop to draw an Event card, the Creepy Puppet. Jonah's voice is louder as he reads aloud how the puppet appears and attacks him with a tiny spear. At this point he laughs, and then reads aloud the procedural information on the card with descending volume and increasing rapidity. The puppet and Jonah's character fight (i.e. roll dice against each other for a higher total), with Hannah rolling on behalf of the puppet. The result is that the puppet

strikes Jonah for 6 Speed damage, forcing Jonah to reduce his character's speed by six steps. This is followed by the below exchange.

R: "Hey, a big man against a puppet." ((sternly looking at Jonah))

J: "But do you realize [what]"

R: "[Look] what a"

H: "<I'm [creepy>]."

J: " [Do you realize] what that puppet is. It's a friggin' midget from this jungle clan a midget who's really incredibly mean and irritating."

~~~

J: "This totally reminds me of something like that 'cuz they always have some spear or something."

#### *Excerpt 4.1.2*

Jonah had previously declared that his character would be competent in fighting monsters, but here he gets whupped. Richard reframes what just happened, wondering how Jonah's character could possibly be bested by a being of smaller stature. Jonah's character disk and character figure depict a tall, muscular, broad-shouldered but thin-waisted man, while Jonah himself is rotund and more of like what the euphemism of 'big man' might refer to. Richard, then, appears to attribute a feature of the player Jonah to the character played by Jonah, furthering the idea that they are one. In between the bemused banter, before Jonah gets to make his defense, Hannah interjects with a remark where she describes the Creepy Puppet as if she were the puppet, i.e. in first person. She has definitely got the idea that there is a puppet in the game world, and that it is creepy. Jonah, in his defense, goes on a tangent about the puppet, where it is from and what it is like. After everyone's laughed, he returns to his remark. What he means by "this" is the event; the appearance of the puppet and the beatdown. He is referring to other media, where there are apparently puppets carrying spears or something, clearly drawing connections between this event in this game and other narrative or game spaces. Jonah also exhibits emergent storytelling, needing just the notion of a puppet and a spear to begin to spin a yarn about an entire jungle midget culture.

What passes between the previous exchange and the next extract is just a few points of rules and procedure. Right on the next turn, which is Pete's, we are dropped the following gem. Pete's character is a little boy, and Hannah's is Father Reinhardt, a middle-aged preacher.

P: "I might just go there to(.)to be with that guy." ((moves his figure to where Hannah's is))

H: "With *Father*."

J: "You figured you'd go be with [the priest.]"

P: " [*I don't* ]*want to be [alone ]>.*"

R: " [Doesn't] Quinn have-[why's your.]" ((points to character figures in the wrong place and moves them to their right places))

H: " [Aww ] *<I will [protect you>.*"

J: " [Ah I'm a bit of] a solo guy."

R: "Us women got left alone."

P: " [*<Protect me>.* ]"

R: "[How about that, women]"

H: " *<I will protect you>.*"

P: " [*<Aww nice>.* ]"

J: " [I'm a bit of a solo kind of] guy."

#### *Excerpt 4.1.3*

There is a lot of overlapping speech in this excerpt, to the point where only a few lines are not overlapping with another. Pete comes up with a reason for why his character moved to where Hannah's character is: to not be alone. That there is our first example of a motive being imagined for an action. Hannah follows suit with her reply. While this happens, Richard suddenly notices that two character figures (apparently Quinn's and Jonah's) have changed places and switches them with each other. This prompts Jonah to describe his character in the first person again, this time as a man who goes it alone. Richard, referring to his and Quinn's female characters, also describes their state in the first person. In fact, in all this imagining, no one refers to their character in the third person anymore, not even Pete.

Rather, he suggests a new idea about his character: that he needs protection. There appear to be three negotiations of mental images taking place here: one between Pete and Hannah, one between Richard and implicitly Quinn, and another with Jonah speaking to no one particular. It might be because all this talk overlaps that all these negotiations are repeated: Richard reiterates his observation, Pete and Hannah replay their dialogue, and Jonah repeats his idea. It is as if each party is trying to get the others to react to their mental image. The game is a stage for their narrative ideas, each theater company trying to impress the others.

The narrative negotiation ends right after Jonah's repeat with a rules question and from there a short sidetrack – testament to just how quickly the mind can transition from one thing to something else entirely. Pete continues with his turn, which he had left unfinished. He moves to discover a Junk Room, whereupon he draws an Omen card, depicting a Pentagram Medallion. As Quinn moves to discover the Dusty Hallway and then the Graveyard, Pete and Hannah return to their narrative.

P: "What was-was."

R: "Nothing happens there."

Q: "I still have [speed-speed left.                    ]"

P: "                    [Hannah-ha-Hannah's uhh] the character's name."

H: "*Father Reinhardt.*"

Q: "*Really.*" ((looking at a room tile he drew, not the speakers))

P: "Reinhard Bonnke."

R: "Should these always be placed [so that(.)that there'd be a uhh.                    ]"

P: "                    [<*Father Reinhardt come to protect me.*>]"                    ((Jonah and Hannah laugh))

Q: "[Well as well as possible.                    ]"

P: " [<*I don't want to be alone.*>]"

R: "Right so it [doesn't matter if the old                    ]wouldn't fit."

H: "                    [<*I don't see you anymore.*>]"

H: "[<*I lost you.*>                    ]"

J: " [They ended up] at a graveyard."

What happens in excerpt 4.1.4 is that Richard and Quinn focus on Quinn's turn. Richard declares the obvious, that no card needs to be drawn in the Dusty Hallway, and Quinn confirms that he may keep moving, to his apparent dismay, to the Graveyard. Meanwhile, Pete, who appears to have trouble with Hannah's name, inquires as to her character's name, which he then associates with Reinhard Bonnke, a famous preacher. While Richard and Quinn assure each other of correct tile placement procedure, Pete picks up where his earlier narrative left off, affirming the motivation of his character to stay with Hannah's character. Hannah laments that her character is no longer with Pete's boy, providing what might be a reason for it: she lost him, though it was Pete that moved away from Hannah. It appears that the position of the characters on the room tiles is what Hannah draws her narrative information from. The plastic character figures and the card board tiles are, to borrow a term from film, the game's *mise-en-scène* (French for 'placing on stage'). Of note is that, so far, everyone has read all text on cards aloud in English, except Richard, and Hannah's and Pete's acting has continued in the language of the game, English.

At the Graveyard, Pete has to stop to draw an Event card, Creepy Crawlies, causing his character to lose one point of sanity. Hannah asks what it is that they're looking for in this mansion, to which Richard responds that "it is just what we do." Next, as Quinn rescues his pizza from the oven, Richard moves to find the Abandoned Room, whereupon he has to stop to draw an Omen card, depicting a Spirit Board. Hannah, electing to not go along with the wishes of Pete's character earlier posed, moves away from Pete's character to discover the Vault, which she does not succeed in opening. She has to stop there to draw an Event card, the Angry Being, which causes her to lose one point of sanity. Jonah moves to discover the Dining Room, whereupon he has to stop to draw an Item card, the Dog. Curiously, having read the card, Jonah analyzes the card's benefits as a card and not as an imaginable character. Pete, also deciding not to fulfill the wishes of his character, moves in the opposite direction from Hannah, discovering the Bedroom, whereupon he has to stop to draw an Event card, the Phone Call. We come to the following exchange.

P: “<Father>” ((while drawing an Event card))

P: “A phone [call ].” ((reading the card title))

H: “[What] son?”

J: “The phone rings!” ((laughs in surprise, as does everyone else))

P: “Phone call(.) A phone rings in the room(.) ((most of this is reading))  
*You feel compelled to answer it(.) Roll two dice(.) A sweet little granny  
 voice says <tea and cake tea and cakes you always we-we’re my favorite>  
 gain on-one sanity(.) And and if I roll a th-three then <I’m always here for  
 you(.) pattycakes(.) watching> and then gain one knowledge(.) And on a  
 roll of 1 to 2 <I’m here sweet-tu-turn>(. ) tums(.) <give us a kiss> and then  
 take one die of mental damage(.) And then a zero <bad little children  
 must be punished> and then take two dice of physical damage(.) So that  
 kind of thing well that fits quite well for a child like this.*

#### Excerpt 4.1.5

That Pete and Hannah do not move their characters along is a continuation of the narrative they’ve concocted: last we heard, Hannah’s character had lost Pete’s. As Pete draws his Event card, he follows up the earlier dialogue by calling out for Hannah’s character, to which Hannah responds. It is the only narrative idea that has been carried along since excerpt 4.1.3. Their narrative negotiation is interrupted here by an apparently more interesting twist, the Phone Call event card. Everyone chuckles or laughs as Pete reads aloud the various scenarios the card can produce, depending on his upcoming die roll. His evaluation of the card as a whole – that it fits his character – suggests there are both palatable and unpalatable ways for game world things to line up. His remark betrays a conscious process of mentally tasting combinations of game features to find what makes for sweet and what makes for sour mental images.

Resolving his Event card, Pete rolls a one and loses one point of sanity. Quinn, leaving the Graveyard, loses one point of knowledge to a tile effect, and moves to discover a Burned Room. He has to stop to draw an Omen, the Holy Symbol. Richard moves to discover the Kitchen, whereupon he has to stop to draw and Omen. Pete suggests that “distressing music” would be, again, fitting. The game does not come with a soundtrack, so Quinn fulfills the request and goes to put on horror movie theme music from Spotify. Hannah moves to discover the Mystic Elevator, a room that moves randomly whenever someone steps in it. It takes her to



the Basement landing, wherefrom she continues to move and discovers the Organ Room (the instrument, not innards). Stopping to draw an Event card, she gets Possession (meaning a ghostly apparition tries to woo her character), which drops her character's sanity to its second lowest value. As the song playing in the background changes, the players comment that the previous one (the theme from Hannibal in MIDI format) was not at all scary while the current one (the theme from The Exorcist) is much tenser. Jonah moves to discover the Patio, where he draws an Event card, the Revolving Door. This causes a second room tile to be drawn and placed – the Bloody Room – and a card board token that says “Wall Switch” to be positioned between the Patio and the Bloody Room. Jonah's character is immediately moved to the Bloody Room, where he draws an Item card, the Axe. Hannah reports that she “feels like watching The Exorcist”, which starts a short discussion on the scariness of that movie and who likes to watch horror movies in the first place. It is now Pete's turn again, and we return to a familiar narrative.

Q: “You had that grandma encounter last.”

P: “I had that grandma encounter and [you can only go in one]

H: “ [ <Son where are _____ ] you.>  
((dangles her character figure above the room it is in))

J: “You ar-[are in the basement.]”

H: “ [ <I play music (.) find] [me _____ ]>.” ((still dangling))

P: “ [He can't quite hear] you 'cuz he you are there (.) [in the basement].”

H: “ [ <Find me _____ ] ((inaudible)) can find me.>” ((Jonah's grunt masks part of Hannah's utterance))

#### *Excerpt 4.1.6*

The “grandma encounter” is what stood out to Quinn from Pete's previous turn. It may be indicative of immersion in the flow of events that Quinn chooses to refer back to Pete's previous turn in this way and not by, say, reminding him of the room he moved to help him find his figure on the table, or by returning to the fact that his character's sanity went down. That event is not dwelled on, with Hannah instead taking up the familiar yarn. Previously, when a character has spoken, its character figure has not been touched. Now, however, Hannah decides to twirl or

dangle her character figure between her thumb and middle finger above the Organ Room, where her character last moved. It appears that, during her second line, with her character in her finger tips she also taps it on the part of the Organ Room tile where the massive organs are depicted. This, to me, resembles how I as a child and children I see today play with LEGO dudes and other dolls: As we imagine the world around them, movement of a doll is used to indicate that the character speaks or is otherwise engaged. Movement of a doll against another or touching a fixed element of indicates interaction between the two. Hannah is openly playing with the character figure or doll. The narrative is no longer new or surprising, and this causes no outright laughter, though the players do look amused. Note how Hannah calls to Pete's character as "son". Whether this is meant to indicate family relations or just a form of address we can't be sure as of yet, but if it is the former case it represents an interesting development in Hannah's mind – for all we know, she could suddenly have confused the meaning of Father Reinhardt, though she earlier understood the title to mean priest. Jonah at first appears to respond to Hannah's call, but he's actually stating which floor Hannah's character is on and not Pete. Pete comes up with a reason for why his character does not follow Hannah to the Organ Room – not because he as a player wants to explore another direction, but because his character can't hear Hannah's. The tone of Hannah's final line is one of lamentation, though I can't unfortunately be sure of what she says because of Jonah's grunting.

Pete moves to discover the Tower, whereupon he has stop to draw an Event card, the Secret Stairs. This causes a cardboard token with the words 'Secret stairs' to be placed on Pete's character's locations – the Tower – and an identical token to be placed where Pete desires. He decides to have it placed on Hannah's character's location – the Organ Room. The Event card Pete drew dictates that, though he may normally not move further, he may follow the secret stairs if he so wishes. This information prompts Hannah to say "<Follow the music>" and to hum a tune not unlike the music that had just faded away in the background. However, this time without narrative reasoning or reasoning of any kind Pete chooses to not take the secret stairs. Erroneously, Pete moves again to discover the Library, whereupon he has to stop to draw an Event card, the Safe. This causes a cardboard token with the word "Safe" to be placed on the Library tile. Opening the Safe requires a good die roll coupled with a high Knowledge value, which spawns our next excerpt.

P: "But-but if I only have *knowledge* only four

J: "I wouldn't recommend."

R: "Here somewh."

P: "Who has (.) would could someone come that has more *knowledge*."

H: "I have four."

J: "My [knowledge] is real lo-at-real-at three."

Q: " [Four. ]" ((shows with fingers))

P: "All of them are equally dens-dunces."

~~~ ((Richard notes that because Pete ends his turn at the Library, he gains one point of Knowledge from a tile effect; Pete is elated, etc.))

R: "Yeah it's easiest to come through there." ((traces path with finger from Hannah's end of Secret Stairs to Pete's character))

P: "Yeah it's worth it to <Father come here up>

H: "<Ok-okay>." ((underlining reflects tone change from high to low))

Excerpt 4.1.7

We haven't had a stats discussion for a while. As before, you can see here that everyone refers to their Knowledge value in the first person, instead of speaking of their character as separate from themselves. However, much like with the change that happens when people talk about 'our team' when it is winning and 'that team' when the same bunch is losing, Pete switches to the third person plural when he appraises the information he has just received. He removes his character from himself, distancing him to the level of all other characters. It is interesting that Pete placed the Secret Stairs token at Hannah's location. We will return to this in the interview analysis, but he said then that he had their narrative on his mind as he did this. Though he didn't take that path initially, he returns to the narrative immediately when Richard points out that Hannah's character is best positioned to come help Pete. What begins as an evaluative statement on his part cuts off and transitions to a narrative voice. When Hannah responds, she decides to forgo their earlier inability to hear each other in the narrative, and replies by acquiescing. Everyone laughs at her response. Her stutter and change of tone from her earlier high pitch to a low one are taken by Quinn as a sign of reluctance and fear. Re-enacting Hannah's stutter and

tone switch, he comments that “Dad’s a little scared”. What earlier seemed to pass for just Hannah recasting Father Reinhardt as Pete’s character’s paternal relation has been accepted in the canon by at least Quinn. This highlights the potential impact of the smallest of throwaway quips if the opportune situation presents itself. The immediacy with which everyone reacts and how Quinn immediately picks up on the previously short-lived idea that Hannah’s character is Pete’s character’s dad is testament to just how all kinds of bits and pieces repose in the mind, ready for narrative assembly at a moment’s notice.

Quinn, on his turn, moves to discover the Collapsed Room, which causes him to fall through the floor to the Storeroom. There he draws an Item card, the Dark Dice. Quinn’s body fills the video at this point, hiding what Pete points to exactly, but it is likely the character figure of Quinn’s. Pete comments that “she looks exactly like in the Alien movies (sic) that Sigourney Weaver, that woman” and to this Quinn agrees. Because Quinn’s character was not hurt in her fall through the Collapsed Room, Pete says that she is, like Weaver, a tough one. As Quinn begins to read his Item card aloud, Hannah takes up Quinn’s character figure and retorts that she sports quite the love handles, referring presumably to the character figure’s wavy plastic mold. As Quinn goes on, Pete and Jonah take a closer look at the character figure as well and decide the love handles are actually a belt.

I’ve not excerpted the above exchange because of its choppiness *in situ*, but I’ll pause to analyze it nonetheless. So far we have seen that the relative position of character figures on the board can trigger or be used to cook up narrative ideas. Their physical presence has also become a point you can touch to engage with the story world – picking it up like a pen to write with on an imaginary canvas. Here we see that their appearance can also trigger associations with other narratives in different media as well as real life persons. Quinn’s character model, though only two centimeter in height and crudely molded, was the conduit through which Pete connected *Aliens* in his mind with *Betrayal*. The association may not have become anything yet, and for all we know so far it may not manifest again, but as we saw with Father-as-in-Priest becoming Father-as-in-Dad, small details like this can jump back in when someone makes the appropriate connections.

Richard moves to discover the Statuary Corridor, whereupon he has to stop to draw an Event card, the Shrieking Wind. As Richard and Quinn go through what the card does and which characters, if any, are in an applicable room (depicting an outside facing window), Pete and Hannah agree that the game has too much text and too much English, despite their pleasure so far in using English. Quinn voices his disagreement, and Pete takes the complaint a step further by likening the game in this respect to English-language LARP (Live Action Roleplay). “We’ll just don costumes and ‘to live or not to live,’” he said, putting a hand out in the air in a faux-Shakespearean manner. Richard concludes his turn by evaluating his character’s performance: “Geez look at how little I’ve moved. Think about it. I haven’t gotten anywhere – this little girl’s just hopeless.”

Three wee things stand out in this part, which I will again analyze sans excerpt. Pete and Hannah gave no warning of becoming weary of card and tile text and especially not of the same with English. While deciphering the card and tile text had not seemed a great joy – though neither could it have been said to look like a bore – both players have so far been by far the most active in speaking English, mostly for character dialogue. Contrast this with Quinn, who has spoken the least with regard to the narrative elements (though he has not been as quiet on the whole as the excerpts might lead you to believe) – he is the one defend the amount of English text in the game. On another note, Richard brings a new interpretation to the fore: evaluating his performance, he attributes his poor progress to the little girl character he plays. It is as if the character is a vehicle for Richard himself, a bike the wheels of which he kicks when the going is slow.

Hannah moves to discover the Pentagon Chamber, whereupon she must stop to draw an Omen card, the Book, which increases her Knowledge. Making the haunt roll – performed after each Omen card is rolled – she pauses to wait until the haunting music “lets up”. As the violin tremolo goes on and on, she can’t “stand to wait” and rolls the bones. There is quiet excitement in the air, but the Haunt does not begin – Hannah rolls more than the total number of Omens drawn. The slack in tension shows in our players turning to less pressing issues, like the second pizza in the oven. Jonah moves to discover the Gardens, whereupon he must stop to draw and Event card, the Mystic Slide. As he reads it, everyone else reacts to the wailing in the background – not scared by it, but rather in appreciation of how it suits the setting.

Out of the blue, Hannah, who just had her turn, remarks that the game is too passive. Jonah's Event card causes a cardboard token that says "Mystic Slide" to be placed in the Gardens. It takes him to the Crypt, where he has to draw another Event card, Something Slimy, which causes him to lose one point of Knowledge. Next, Pete succeeds in opening the Safe in the Library, from which he gains two Item cards, the Revolver and the Bottle Containing Black Liquid. Erroneously – he should've stopped because he drew a card – Pete continues by moving to discover the Servants' Quarters, whereupon he has to stop to draw an Omen card, the Girl. Pete especially has made a few remarks during the gameplay of this paragraph about how good and tense and appropriate the music playing in the background is. As he draws the Omen card but before he begins to read it, he says "now, now's a good moment, OMEN", where he says *omen* in a very horrific, raspy and deep tone of voice (with the theme from *The Shining* in the back).

I want to highlight how our players are reacting more to the music of late. On Hannah's turn, as the music becomes just a violin tremolo, she seems expect it to end. That the tremolo turns out prolonged causes no great disappointment and it is evidently not a big deal for Hannah to emotionally invest in the music, only to let go of that mere seconds later. The expectation may indicate, for the lack of a better word, 'cultural' knowledge, where violin tremolos conclude with silence or transition into crescendos – so there'd be a clear moment of change where the music "lets up", as she Hannah said. Similarly, as Pete draws a card he suddenly feels that it goes together with the moment. The theme from *The Shining* at this point has been playing in the background for two minutes and ten seconds of its three and a half minute length. Toward the very beginning of it, Pete said that it sounds great but that he does not recognize it. The movement Pete specifically calls attention to at 2:10 is one that has appeared twice before, and is followed by the by a gong-like sound. Prior to it there has been just enough of a lull in the music – a kind of low rumbling – that was further obscured by player talk. Pete's senses are acute, however, and he appears to trust that he knows how the movement in the music will go. Though the music is not originally part of the game, the setting of the game was the one to evoke the selection of music, indicative of a desire to enhance what's already there. The narrative accentuation that is the effect of the music is dependent on the game's narrativity to call for it.

Pete rolls the dice, everyone anticipating that the Haunt will begin, but though the players correctly assume that the odds of the haunt starting now are high it fails to do so. Quinn moves the Mystic Elevator, which takes him to the Chapel, whereupon he must draw an Event card, the Spider. The card says that “a spider the size of your fist lands on your shoulder and crawls into your hair.” As he reads this, Quinn pauses to scratch his head, which he later said was intentional. The card causes Quinn to gain one point of Speed and the tile causes him to gain one point of Sanity, gains which he appraises by stating that “if I become the traitor you guys will be pretty much in trouble.”

Quinn’s assertion contains an interesting pair of words: *become traitor*. In a non-interactive story the traitor would be pre-determined, and we might say that he *is revealed*, or someone *turns out to be* the traitor. But here, as the character to turn traitor is determined during the creation of the narrative, one of the characters will *become* traitor without any planning on the part of the players. Betraying the others will not be their active decision, but it is the game and its design that brands one of the players with the mark of traitor.

Now Richard moves to discover the Coal Chute, which drops him to the Basement Landing, from where he continues to move and discovers the Gymnasium, whereupon he must stop to draw an Omen, the Bite. This causes Richard’s character to lose two points of Might. With heightened anticipation, the players await Richard’s Haunt roll – and it triggers the haunt. Turning to the Traitor’s Tome – a rulebook with scenario special rules and goals for the Traitor – Richard and Quinn cross-reference the Omen card last drawn and the room tile it was drawn in to arrive at scenario 35, Small Change. The scenario specifies that the character with the highest Knowledge value turns traitor. After a little deliberation, this is found to be Hannah’s character. However, she expresses discomfort with the idea of having to play alone without someone to guide her. By her own account, Hannah is not a ‘gamer’, and frequently experiences difficulty understanding games. Pete offers to play Traitor instead, but it is still Hannah’s character that turns traitor, so they switch: Hannah takes the little boy and Pete takes Father Reinhardt.

Haunt 35, Small Change, casts the Traitor as a mad scientist of sorts, who has lured the explorers into the house to conduct an experiment involving

felines and homo sapiens minutus. With a vial of liquid that turns to gas as it hits the floor, the Traitor turns himself and the Explorers to mouse-size people. There are two cats in the house, and the goal of the Traitor is now to feed three of the remaining four explorers to the cats. He knows they are trying to escape on a Toy Airplane. His cats can swat the plane down, however, and then attack the hapless Explorers. The Explorers can be killed, but first the cats need to beat them – meaning they take the player character in their mouth – and will at the start of their next turn swallow the hapless Explorers. The Explorers are not directly told any of this.

The Explorers' goal is to find the Toy Airplane, power it up, and escape from an appropriate room with at least two players on board. When flying the plane, friends can be picked up on the way. While they're on the Airplane, the Traitor's cats can't eat them. The Explorers can free their friend from the cats' clutches by beating them in a fight, but the cats are formidable opponents. An Explorer caught by a cat can, on his turn, attempt to escape. The Traitor does not know any of this.

Both sides know that, being small, all the player characters and the two cat minions move slower than normal – reflected by the rule change that doors must be counted while moving from room to room. Previously it took one step to move from one room to another, but now that will require two. There will also now be the risk of getting hurt while taking the stairs. The cats can't be killed, but they can be stunned if beaten – meaning they'll lose their next turn. The players will also not be drawing any cards, though they must still stop upon first discovering rooms with card symbols on them.

While Pete figures out his part of the Haunt, Quinn explains all that the Explorers know to Richard, Hannah and Jonah. They go through the rules twice, feeling a little lost in the minutiae. Questions arise that are not outright answered in the rules, but which are straightforward if the situation is imagined. For example, Hannah asks whether it is possible to get on the plane while caught by a cat. The players agree that Hannah, whose character has the highest value in Knowledge – the trait required in finding and powering up the plane – goes searching for the plane. The others agree to try and keep out of the cats' clutches and to await for Hannah to pick them up.

There appear to be two reasons for why the new rules are difficult to digest, even for more experienced players. For one, there may be an inability to dive in to the situation, to embrace and embellish the scene set up by the scenario, perhaps due to lacking memories of narratives to draw from. On the other hand, the rules present barriers to creativity from the outset. For example, before anyone suggests it, the rules state that Pete may not use the plane even should it be available to him. No reason is given in story terms, though for gameplay the reason is quite clear: should Pete find and take the plane, the heroes would not stand a chance. This barrier setting is notably characteristic of board games but would not be found in a related tabletop game format: the tabletop roleplaying game, where the players may elect to do anything and the game master determines what they need to roll to succeed on the fly. A board game sets limits to what can happen and predetermines the odds of success. It may be that this creates an expectation of barriers existing, clearly demarcating what is and what is not possible.

Pete begins by telling the others that there are two cats in the house, which he places in the Entrance Hall and the Gymnasium, where Richard's character is. "Ugly cats", exclaim Jonah and Hannah in concert upon seeing the card board tokens representing them. Pete does not move his character, but one cat takes Richard in its mouth – the players fail to roll dice for this and simply let it happen, while they should have treated it as any other attack. The other cat he moves to the Statuary Corridor, where there is no one. Quinn moves to the Dusty Hallway and uses his Dark Dice item, and as he rolls the dice to see what his card does, the following exchange drops:

R: ((laughing as he begins, points at Jonah's Dog card)) Hah pr-pretty swell he has he has a dog and this guy has cats [I wonder how]

J: [Bu-bu-h-h-he] he isn't the aggressive type he isn't the aggressive type (.) he isn't the aggressive type had he been a *guard dog* then it would've been different.

Excerpt 4.1.8

Richard is the first to realize the potential for antagonism between Jonah's dog and Pete's cats. When I asked them about this scene later, Jonah still suggested that the dog could not fight against the cats because it was not the aggressive type. Considering that the Haunt rules name specific items (like the

Revolver) that may be used to attack cats from the plane – it makes sense in story terms that the players can't hit the cats from the plane with an axe but can fire at them – it would be a curious omission to not detail anything the dog can do. The scenario books are quite meticulous about finding ways for the players to utilize obvious items in other scenarios. It is interesting that it didn't occur to the players that the dog could not fight the cats because, like the players, it shrunk. This may be attributed to the possible lack of any narrative memories where characters are shrunk and need to fend off cats and other like-size animals – though there are such movies, for example the 1989 Disney comedy *Honey I shrunk the Kids*. The scenario does not call up any prior narrative associations to that end, and neither do the players name any such connections in the interview.

Quinn's Dark Dice enable him to move an additional step into an adjacent room, which is the Entrance Hall. Richard, on his turn, attempts to get away from the cat's paws. The procedure is that Richard should pick one of the four stats and contest it with the cat's corresponding stat – both rolling a number of dice respectively equal to the chosen trait's value. Pete is not quite clear on this, and when Richard picks Sanity, he at first is about to roll his character's Sanity instead of the cat's. As this would create an imbalance that, if allowed to continue, would've made the game highly unlikely for Pete to win, I saw it fit to intervene and point out that the cats have stats also. After some deliberation Pete caught on. Richard fails to escape. Hannah then moves to the Tower, and Jonah moves to where Richard is. He attempts to free Richard's girl wielding the axe, and succeeds, freeing Richard. The cat, as a result, is stunned. Again misreading the rules, Pete suggests that Richard is also stunned, which he asks me to confirm, and I quickly point out to him how the rules actually go – which is in line with what one might expect storywise in this situation. Though the cat is stunned because it was hit, why should Richard be stunned as well? Again, it is difficult to find anything specifically beyond the lack of narrative associations that would explain why the players do not attempt to clarify rules and limitations through imagination.

Pete moves his character to the Pentagon Chamber and moves the cat that was not stunned to the Gymnasium, where Jonah, Richard and the other cat are. At this point Quinn uses his imagination and suggests that perhaps Pete's character somehow mentally controls the cats and that, should Pete get beat up, perhaps the

cats would let up. The others do not take to the plan, though no one denies the plausibility of the mental image. Jonah chuckles at the idea of mice doing that, and Quinn says that “this is actually a really good story”. He then moves to the Game Room and attempts to find the plane, which he succeeds in. Richard then moves to the Pentagon Chamber where Pete is and hits him – Pete loses one point of Speed. Hannah moves to the Junk Room. Jonah tries to escape the clutches of the cat with his Might and succeeds in escaping. He then moves to the Pentagon Chamber to smack Pete, and hits him hard. So hard, in fact, that I cut out this excerpt.

P: “Father Reinhardt (.) <remember me my son.>”

R: “He died.”

H: “He died is the game over.”

~~~

J: “Hey I have a dog let’s see if I can make it there (.) the dog can move normally.”

R: “What will you do with the dog.”

J: “Well I can take the item to myself.”

R: “You can just take it by yourself as usual.”

J: “Is that still possible.”

Q: “Imagine that you’re giving the dog orders being mouse size.”

J: “Well in that case I’ll just take it like that.”

R: “Can he take it like that.”

#### *Excerpt 4.1.9*

It has been a long time since we’ve heard of this narrative, but here Pete briefly returns to the relationship of Reinhardt and the boy. No one else, not even Hannah, is on board with. The story appears to be forgotten, or perhaps just it has been done to death. Hannah is more concerned with whether the game ends at this point, and after a little confusion the players again find that the rulebooks mean what they say: neither specifies killing the Traitor as a condition for winning, and so the game continues. Jonah remembers his dog, and wants to get the item – the Book – that Pete dropped as he died. There’s a curious confusion here harking back to

what we saw earlier: the players think the dog has not shrunk. It is unclear why Jonah thought he would not necessarily be able to take the book, and though Richard at first figures he can, he later asks whether he may! Quinn uses story terms to reason why he can't use the dog, suggesting that the dog is big and Jonah is small. The rules state that all Items and Omens the players were carrying at the moment of shrinkage have shrunk as well, but in the case of the dog this has not hit home with the players.

Pete next moves a cat of his to where Jonah and Richard are and takes Jonah in its mouth – again without rolling dice. Quinn attempts to power on the plane but fails. He also uses the unpredictable Dark Dice item, which this time throws him to where Hannah is and away from the plane. Richard gets away from Pete and moves toward the Junk Room via the Secret Stairs, forgetting to roll dice to see if he gets hurt climbing the stairs while puny. Quinn curses the Dark Dice item in a tone suggesting he speaks in the voice of his character. Hannah moves to the Entrance Hall, making her way toward the plane. For the first time in a long time, Hannah asks why on Earth she has that Girl (an Omen card) with her. Let's pause there.

H: "Why do I still have this."

J: "Because it is."

Q: "You found her you saved her."

J: "She's with you it's [your buff it's useful. ]"

H: " [I don't care about her.]

~~~ ((talking about the gameplay usefulness of the Girl))

Q: "So in a way you're that girl's hostage."

J: "You can't see it that way." ((laughing))

Q: "<If you get out of here (.) if you leave me here (.) [then I suffer.>]"

H: " [She's in my body]
She's my other persona."

Excerpt 4.1.10

This little outburst may have to do with becoming tired of the game, which has at this point gone on for almost two hours. Jonah again uses gameplay terms ("buff" meaning an item that increases your stats) while Quinn uses story

terms. Hannah's weariness pours out via her acting capacity to her character, and she again switches to English when playing her part. This is the first instance in quite a while where someone really spins a little bit of narrative yarn. Quinn's interpretation of the Girl's role is likely connected to the fact that the Girl Omen card says it may not be traded or dropped or stolen. That is, it will remain with her unless she dies. That there's no way to shake the Girl Quinn turns into an idea of involuntary seizure of freedom. How energetic the players are clearly bears on how much they imagine or at least how much they voice their thoughts. Excerpts in this analysis have been less and less frequent toward the end, reflecting a gradual decline in the players' active narration.

Jonah attempts to get away from the cat still with him in the Pentagon Chamber, and succeeds, stunning one of Pete's cats again. Quinn compares the axe wielding Jonah to Narnia's Reepicheep, a warrior mouse. "Oh wait we're just small and not mice," he then remembers. Jonah moves to where Richard's little girl is. Pete moves his unstunned cat after the Explorers, but does not quite get to them. Quinn's character makes it to the Entrance Hall, stopping one short of the Game Room where the plane is. After Richard makes his way in the same direction, Hannah reaches the Game Room, and attempts to power on the plane but fails. Jonah stays apace with Richard and sends his dog ahead to the Game Room with the Book. Both him and Richard did not recall the rule about traversing stairs – it is a dangerous climb, so they should've rolled to see whether they get hurt. Pete's cats race after them, both just stopping short of reaching the Explorers. Next, Quinn reaches the Game Room and there fails to power on the plane. Richard follows after him, as does Hannah, who finally succeeds in getting the plane rolling. Jonah comes to guard the others, and his Dog drops the Book in the Game Room. Pete's cats bust in the Entrance Hall, and one takes Jonah in its paws. Quinn and Richard climb aboard the toy plane, and Hannah flies it through the revolving wall into the Bloody Room. As Jonah is about to try and escape from the cats, the Explorer players realize without a word they do not need Jonah to get away. They just need the three already on board the plane to escape, and laugh at the fact. Jonah succeeds in eluding the cats once again, though he always rolls fewer dice in his attempt than Pete's cat. Pete decries the cats as "impotent" upon their failure to devour Jonah again. He moves his cats in for the kill once more, one engaging Jonah again. "The dog's pretty impotent too 'cuz he

doesn't scare the cats away," Quinn says, reinforcing the idea that the dog should somehow be able to do something about the cats despite its size – or because they do not remember it being shrunk. Quinn and Pete pass their turns and Hannah flies the toy plane to the Garden, ready to leave the mansion behind. At this point Pete remembers a fine point of the rules: while they only need three out of the four Explorers to escape to win, they may not leave anyone behind alive.

Q: "Look where we are already we ar-we like we can smell freedom and then someone realizes where's Jonah."

H: "Isn't he here onboard."

R: "But we-we won't no we won't go."

Q: "Or asks ain't that right Jonah (.) Jonah."

Excerpt 4.1.11

Quinn still has some narrative energy left in him, and gets Hannah to imagine along for a bit. We'll press on for now, the end is near. Pete then realizes that if he eats Jonah, the others will escape and win. It is Jonah's turn, and he again succeeds in escaping the cat, but then fails to open the revolving wall. Pete's cats run after, but do not attack Jonah. The others wait in the Garden. This time Jonah succeeds in opening the revolving wall and gets through. He moves to the Garden, and Quinn attempts to get Jonah on the plane. He succeeds, and Jonah is now on board. It is time for Pete's turn.

H: "Can the cats attack us."

R: "I suppose uh."

Q: "They can try."

R: "Can try."

H: "But are we flying high enough that."

Q: "The cats can try."

J: "Ah, right."

Excerpt 4.1.12

Hannah suddenly shows that there is something going on in her imagination still, as she questions Pete's cats' ability to attack the plane while it is in the air because of its altitude. Maintaining a connection with the game world is not up to just active imagining. Hannah here has retained an unconscious link with the game world and, when confused, enables her to jump right back in with a mental image of the plane in the air out of reach of the cats.

Pete may simply pass through the revolving wall and moves his cats to the Garden. His first cat fails to bat down the plane, but his second succeeds. The plane falls to the ground and must be restarted, which Pete succeeds in. The plane being on the ground causes tremendous difficulty to the players. Pete, Richard and Hannah fail to grasp what the plane can do while on the ground, what needs to be done to the plane, and how you get on the plane. Earlier, once the plane was found, it had to be started and on the next turn of the player powering it up it would be airborne. Anyone on the room tile with the toy plane not in a cat's mouth was on board. Though there was slight hesitation then, it was nothing compared to the frustration some of the players experience at this juncture. Somehow their prior understanding of the rules is forfeit and their imagination is of no help whatsoever. Quinn is away from the table for most of this, and when he returns the rest of his party ask him all these questions several times in a confusing jumble. The relatively short length of that sentence does not accurately reflect how long this aggravating period is. In connection with what might be termed rule and imagination issues, the players also can't agree on what they will do, because some of them do not understand what they can do. Next to no story language is used here.

The final analysis is cold and without emotion as the players burn each other out on solving a non-existent problem: all four Explorers get back on the plane and wait for Pete's next move. He sets his cats upon the little boy and Quinn's woman – still playing it wrong, in that he does not roll dice to see if he succeeds. Next Quinn succeeds in escaping the cats' clutches, stunning the cat. Now Hannah also needs to get away, and this she does, stunning the other cat. Not quite following the flow of the game, Hannah uses her imagination and asks if she could not shoot the cats from the plane with her Revolver – which the rules say she may, but not now, when in the mouth of a cat. Her inquiry goes unresponded, as Pete goes on with his turn, in which he is unable to do anything because his cats are stunned. One after

another, Jonah, Hannah and Richard look at Quinn and anticlimactically ask “did we win now?” Quinn checks the rules one last time to confirm that this is indeed the case – and that is it. All four Explorers escape the mansion on the toy plane, leaving the cats meowing in disappointment. Talk turns to bus schedules, food, the time, my data, and the game is put away, no word said of its many hidden stories again.

4.2 Interview: The world and its inhabitants – What's here?

In this subchapter I collate what the interviewees said about the game world, any animate or inanimate characters in it, and any items they recall. The point is to find out what kind of world they perceived. Interviewee responses will be presented and analyzed player by player, with a wrap-up at the end. As per Ryan’s (2004) first criterion, for the game to have a high degree of narrativity, the game should posit a world populated with characters and objects and ascribe properties to these existents and the world itself.

Hannah had expected the game world to be horrific and scary, and indeed when the game was first pulled out and brought in front of everyone she was quick to ask whether it was going to spook you. Evidently the game’s packaging suggested to her that the game should be scary, but while playing she found nothing of the kind, except maybe some pieces of music that the players put on. To her, the mansion had not shown itself to be an odd one, and saying so she at first glance found only the Pentagram chamber to hint at the supernatural, most rooms (like the Bedroom, the Kitchen and the Junk Room) being more mundane. “But now that I look around I guess there are supernatural places [in the mansion]”, she added. Prior to playing it had also been suggested that the game emulated the much-spoofed spook cartoon Scooby Doo. Hannah did not find the game experience to relate to her image of the cartoon (of which she has not seen a single episode). During the game, however, she did at one point utter the cartoon dog’s famous cry, ‘Scooby-dooby-doo!’ No other conscious associations occurred to her.

As for her character, Hannah had not given much thought to it beyond him being a 60-year-old grandpa. “Now I’d say he’s maybe a demented old man who’s just walking through this mansion and doesn’t really know what he’s doing there. And he bonded with the little boy,” she added. Later in the interview, she

remembered thinking that her character is a little old to be the father of the boy, but then brushed it aside thinking that maybe he adopted the kid. When the Haunt began Hannah had to switch characters to that little boy because, in her own words, “I didn’t know how to be the bad guy”. As the little boy she picked out Quinn’s character as a “mother figure” or “big sister”. The thought occurred to her when: “I was there (pointing) that we should get out just the two of us and those guys (pointing) were somewhere else Jonah and Pete I mean Richard. At that point I got this idea that she’s like this well not a mother figure but a big sister. And that we decided to go together, like women and children first.” Hannah is referring to the moment where she and Quinn have the toy plane up and running, Richard and Jonah are engaged with Pete’s minions several rooms away, and Quinn suggests to Hannah that they leave them two behind and just get out of there.

Of note is that Hannah felt – both during and after the game – that she had trouble understanding the rules and goals, i.e. the gameplay framework. For example, when thinking back to the time Pete placed the Secret Stairs token at Hannah’s location, she revealed she had thought Pete was “supposed to put them there”, while in fact he could’ve placed them anywhere. Finding out to the contrary, she went “aww,” understanding for the first time that the action could’ve fit their narrative. Her difficulty navigating the game, so to speak, is perhaps reflected in how she was able to imagine it. As she is herself clueless, so are the two characters she plays. Apparently, though she found the Mystic Elevator first, played the part of the Creepy Puppet and was engaged in the gameplay at the time of finding the Secret Stairs, these events did not stand out to her. Neither did the Event cards, most of which featured some sort of supernatural encounter, overpower the relative normalcy of most rooms in the mansion. She also openly says that she did not identify with any of the characters, and claims to not have paid any attention to what the Room tiles depicted. The latter is an interesting rejection in light of the fact that she did clearly identify the great organs depicted on the Organ Room tile, where her first character played music.

It may be said then that her gameplay experience was conflicted. And while the game did not posit a world that would’ve atmospherically been in line with her expectations, it did succeed in positing the existence of characters and some character properties (though of little detail) as well as two character relationships that

lasted for more than a turn or more than one utterance. Both of those instances involved the placement and relative proximity of character figures and initiative of other players – Pete calling out to her to protect her, Quinn suggesting that they team up. Other players imported more to her conscious imagination of the characters than the game did, but unconsciously the game pieces did enter her mind as well, for example in that she took Reinhardt to be an old man, which the character disk shows and states.

Pete was the first to say that the mansion is old but that the game is temporally situated in modern times, “judging from the characters’ dress.” The mansion is not just any old mansion though, but lots of things happen there. Pete clearly found mysticism present in the house, specifically naming the small rooms “with a pentagram painted on the floor” (N.B. there’s only one in the game), which revealed to him that witchcraft had been practiced at the mansion. “Though there’s also a chapel in the same house, so there’s something dark under the surface,” he added.

One TV-show the game brought to mind to Pete was *Twin Peaks*, and he also mentions the *Silent Hill* video game series. “There’s that Bloody room, for example”, he said, likely connecting it with the fourth installment of the video game series, the first hours of which take place in a blood covered room. The basement floor with its Pentagram Chamber and coffins, the ground floor’s Chapel, and the dark wood paneling, antlers on walls and bear hide rugs he associated with *Twin Peaks* and *Silent Hill*.

As for characters, Pete saw his character as a jumpy little boy. The gender and size and age of the character are apparent from the character disk and the character figure. That the boy was scared he came up with himself very early on. He says that he made an effort to act out his character. When pressed on the matter of whether he acted out any others than the boy, he nevertheless failed to mention Father Reinhardt, who he controller as the traitor. Pete also recognizes that he acted as a narrator of events at times, though from the gameplay video it is apparent that this was to a much lesser capacity than acting out the boy. Other than the player characters, Pete only mentions the bugs at the graveyard, which his character

encountered at the Graveyard. He admits not paying any attention to any imagery on the room tiles and cards, apart from reading any text that was on them.

Pete does not feel he identified with any character and claims to not have imagined a relationship between any characters – in spite of taking part in with Hannah in a prolonged narrative between their characters. He recalls placing the Secret Stairs token on Hannah's space immediately following their narration, but says that this was not because of the story but more of a tactical consideration. It can be seen on the video that Richard does advise this from a tactical point of view.

Pete, along with Jonah, makes the most associations with other media and stories. It is interesting that he does so – and it can be heard on the video as well – yet he claims to not have really looked at the tiles. Perhaps the atmosphere around the game had more of an effect, for when pressed about what specifically reminded him of *Twin Peaks* and *Silent Hill* Pete had difficulty naming features on room tiles. This was enough to tap into Pete's memory of other stories of gloom. He also extended the few features he could name to more rooms than where they are found, such as with the pentagrams on the floors – there is only one such room, but in the interview he appears to imagine there were more such rooms. As for characters, Pete felt that the characters gained depth and color “mostly through acting out” gameplay. That is, the game pieces had less to do directly with what the characters became than what the players made of how the pieces came together.

For Richard there was a strong sense of entering the unknown throughout the game, what with always finding new places and things. The house itself felt somehow alive, and Richard notes that there was this feeling as if someone or something unseen had been present in the mansion. He feels that he did contemplate what had happened in some of the rooms by looking at what was pictured on the tiles. There were no places that stood out to Richard later, however, and he names fixtures of functional importance, such as the Secret Stairs and Grand Staircase, which were used in moving between floors. He says that the mansion is hard to imagine because it contains so many and such markedly different rooms.

When Pete describes his character as a jumpy little boy, Richard applies the description to his jumpy little girl. Richard “didn't really get into this and didn't really care for anyone in particular”. He directed his character as someone

who is not him, but thought of what he would do were he in her shoes. Though he didn't narrate the emotions of his character as Pete did, Richard asserts that he imagined his character to have felt similarly. Other than the player characters, he specifically named the two cats (the minions of the Traitor) and the dog (a companion of Jonah's character), which the other players followed up on as well. Along with Quinn and Jonah, he remembered that there had been temporary characters that existed for just a moment and then vanished.

Richard is the more seasoned gamer, along with Quinn and Jonah, and also one of the three to have recognized characters on Event cards. That is, he was able to see the cards for what they portrayed beyond the associated procedures. In contrast to Pete and Hannah, on the video Richard does not as often display confusion as to how cards are to be worked out. Experience in games as systems stands in evidence here as helping to separate necessary game language from (strictly speaking) unnecessary story language. Curiously, Richard does not remember the time when an unseen character bit him – the final Omen card before the Haunt began – though he named both unseen characters being there and Event cards depicting temporary characters. The notion of temporariness is interesting as well, in that apparently the temporary characters were not part of the world except for their short existence. They did not have their own dimension or space.

Unlike Hannah, Quinn found the mansion to clearly have supernatural properties, giving the Mystic Elevator as an example. He was the first to affirm what everyone seemed to implicitly think: that it had not occurred to him that there would be anything beyond the mansion. The mansion was the world. Even when they escaped, there was nowhere they escaped to. The game world didn't remind Quinn of any particular movie or game, but he felt that a mansion like this is a recurring element in entertainment. "I don't know what to call that exactly, but it's, like, something that shows up in a lot of films and stuff. It's kind of like its own thing – when you think of an old, abandoned mansion certain things come to mind. It's in some way weird or something has happened there, it is not safe there, you have to be on your guard. It's never a place you get to go to, it's a place you're forced to go to," he said. The word he is looking for is *trope*, a theme or device that is commonly used or associated with a particular context.

Quinn is able to name lots of items in the game world, and suggests that were the players to really think back they could probably name all the Item and Omen cards that represented game world items. “The Dark Dice were just a total nuisance,” he says reflecting on an Item that caused the Explorers to get the toy plane running later rather sooner because the Item moved Quinn away from the plane. He also distinctly remembers the Safe and Pete’s effort to open it, and the chests in the Vault. Still, Quinn does not remember actively looking over any tile imagery, except for one, the Dusty Hallway. “I noticed that there was nothing there,” he says. Like Richard, Quinn also focused more on the functional side of the tiles, the Grand Staircase standing out to him as well as a point of reference for distances.

As for characters, Quinn at first felt as many of the others did that apart from the player characters there were no other characters in the game world but, as Richard said, the house itself felt alive. He, along with Jonah, would later identify specific temporary characters in Event cards, such as spiders, slime, a mist (the shadow that attacked Hannah) and the “hostile doll”. He too moved his character thinking what he would do in the same situation. Quinn didn’t, however, identify with his character: “I felt that I saw my character but not that I was my character. Maybe because it was a woman.” Quinn described his character as gutsy and brave, though not aggressive. “Her strengths lie in thinking, not fighting,” he said. Sure enough, the physical stats of Quinn’s character are lower than her mental stats.

Along with Jonah, Quinn was one of the two players that seemed to remember things that happened to not only his character but to other characters as well. Following several characters and what they did was apparently not difficult for him, but on the flipside he appears to have fleshed out his own character less than Hannah and Pete. Mind, he does nonetheless put his character’s stats into adjectives, and perhaps includes a little post-game interpretation in his evaluation of her unaggressive nature – Quinn didn’t fight anyone during the game. He highlights a highly personal issue with relating to characters: playing a character of a different gender can be barrier to imagination.

Jonah identified considerable overlap between the original core concept of Scooby Doo and the premise of Betrayal at House on the Hill: “[In the show they] go for example to some house that there’s a rumor about that it’s haunted or

something evil's going on and then it happens and then they find out it's a bandit or something." Jonah also remembered several temporarily existing mystical characters, such as the Graveyard bugs, the spider and the "aggressive doll" appearing in the game, but laments that nothing more was learned about them. When asked about the room tiles and what they depict, Jonah's interjection betrays surprise at the fact that there is stuff drawn on them. This is perhaps echoed in his explanation of how he came up with the jungle midget clan background for the Creepy Puppet that attacked him: "I came up with the idea that the doll with the spear was from a jungle because I saw this was in the game room and so I connected it to games." Pursued further, he means that he imagined a computer in the Game Room that the Puppet jumped out of. There is not a computer drawn on the tile though, and there is in fact no indication of electricity in the house. It is notable that he says he saw the name of the room, but not that he looked at any pictorial features of the room.

Jonah described his character as masculine, strong, given to sports, but not very knowledgeable. "And his sanity is kind of at a low level as well," he said, apparently referring to the numerical sanity stat's low value. 'Knowledge' and 'Might' are also character stats, and their relative values are reflected in Jonah's description. His character disk also lists sports as the characters hobby. Regardless, Jonah does not feel he identified with his character or could step in his shoes. One character relationship that can be heard in his recollection of the game is that he "was out to save Richard" when they were pursued by the two cats. Along with Quinn, Jonah was one of the two players that seemed to remember things that happened to not only his character but to other characters as well. However, following several characters and what they did may have been a touch more difficult for him, because he can't seem to keep the facts in order. His recollection of who was affected by what is also markedly inaccurate compared to Quinn. Every time Jonah mentions something happening to a player's character, the character was not the one Jonah remembers.

In summary, *Betrayal* clearly meets the first narrativity criterion. All of the players suggested that the world, existing primarily inside the titular house, had various properties, whether mundane or mystical. They also imagined characters and objects and ascribed properties to some of them. While the game's imagery and text were important sources for imagination and posited the existence of characters and

objects, it was largely the players who embellished them with properties. These they came up with as suggested by the game: by considering the stats of their characters, the character figures' appearance, the character portrait and flavor text on the character disk, the relative positions of the character figures, the specific location of the same. However, the players brought in propositions from outside the game, for example by ascribing their own, real-life properties to the characters and connecting the world to previous narrative associations.

Not everything about the rules, the setting and the game imagery connects with the players, however. To end this section, I will illustrate some aspects of how the game got in the way of the players' imagination and how the players missed some imagination signals the game was clearly giving them. For example, when the Explorers were coming down to ground level from the second floor, they all treated the stairs on the Grand Staircase tile as if they were a door. The game mechanism in the Haunt was that when you move from one room to another, you must count the door as a step. On the room tiles, two opposing yellow boxes denoted a door between rooms (see Image 3.1.1, items 1 and 2). At one end of the Entrance Hall tile (item 1 in Image 3.1.1) there are stairs that lead to the second floor. The first tile you move to when moving to the second floor is the Grand Staircase tile, which depicts the upper end of the stairs. There is no yellow door icon connecting the staircase tile to the Entrance Hall tile. But the players placed their figures on the edge of the Grand Staircase tile as if there was. They treated the move as moving from one room to another, and not as moving from one floor to another. The game makes a distinction about this – moving between floors the mouse-sized Explorers would've had to roll dice to see if they get hurt, while moving between rooms there is no such danger. It is simply slower. Quinn realizes their error during the interview and immediately understands the fault in their imagination at that point.

In addition, the size change the characters experienced at the turn of the Haunt did not register with some players. For instance, in the interview, they're still unclear and confused about whether the dog was shrunk. Quinn is sure it was, as is clear from the rules: all player characters and all Items and Omens (that is, anything portrayed by Item and Omen cards) shrunk. But the others are not so sure. Richard didn't think there was any sense in the dog not being able to fight the cats,

and Jonah and Pete figured it was because the dog was a meek Chihuahua. They can't make this connection:

CAT IS THIS BIG

PLAYERS ARE THIS BIG

DOG IS THIS BIG

Dogs, on the average, are smaller in size than people, and if they're both shrunk, then dogs are still smaller than people. Rather, some of the players persist in thinking that the dog around the same size as the cats, if not bigger. While this issue was cleared from the rules on several occasions, it never stuck. Further, Hannah said that during the game she "didn't at all think that we had been shrunk." The premise of the scenario passed her by completely. Jonah said that he thought the players had actually become mice, which Quinn recognizes imagining some point as well. Both report realizing their "error in imagination", as Quinn put it, during the game.

Not only did the players overlook imagining aspects that the game clearly posited, at least at one point some of them also imagined things that the game did not posit. Discussing the previous misinterpretations, Richard notes that the thought "the plane was supposed to move slower when there were more people on." Hannah immediately agreed with this, thinking that it had been said in the rules. However, no such thing is mentioned in the rules. While the previous misimagination may be in part attributed to playing in a language other than the players' native tongue, this point is more telling about the players thinking beyond what the game material presented. Introducing Richard's imaginary rule change would not require much effort or customization of the game should the players wish to shake the game rules up a little. But originally the game designers have not taken their narrative framework so far as to include this detail. Were the point to be taken as a shortcoming of the game, it could impede its narrativity.

4.3 Interview: The temporal dimension – What's happening?

In this subchapter I collate what the interviewees said about events in the game world and any twists and turns they recall. The point is to find out what kind of changes they perceived to the game world. Interviewee responses will be presented and analyzed player by player, with a wrap-up at the end. As per Ryan's (2004) second criterion, for the game to have a high degree of narrativity it should propose changes

to the world that are caused by nonhabitual physical events, like accidents or deliberate human actions, but not rain, erosion, etc. Change implies temporality, there being what was before and what is now and what will or could be – a historical flux.

The big moment that stood out as a change in the game world to everyone was the transition from the Exploration phase to the Haunt. Jonah came up with a rather dramatic description of what the beginning of the Haunt meant: “A clock like a big clock strikes and everything stops and then something happens to someone and then suddenly things just appear and then everything just changes and we’re in this predicament.” What he means by everything changing is not the mansion changing, but the characters and “the situation”.

Richard felt that things didn’t change during the game but were only revealed. With regard to the Traitor, he means that in terms of narrative the traitor would’ve been decided before the story began and was only revealed when the Haunt began. Richard is applying the narrative structure of a non-interactive scare story to an interactive one. In the game, the Traitor really is not determined beforehand, but Richard nevertheless imagines it so. He later states that he did detect a change in the nature of the game, saying that the moment the Haunt began was the moment “the game really began”. It might be said that Richard senses the transition from play to game as goals and more minute rules are introduced.

Hannah felt a change in player motivation when the Haunt began: “I thought this was super boring until the cats came and then we had a purpose I mean before then we were just stumbling around and I couldn’t make heads or tails of anything.” Like Richard, she also sensed the transition from play to game: “And so when Pete then asked how long is this gonna take still and Quinn said something like an hour or so, I think that’s when the game started for me. I was like “oh yeah?” and at first with the cats I thought they were just like these cute little cats but then when the tokens came I realized they’re these really ugly cats and it started getting a little scary and then it was like serious business.” She also mentions the appearance of foes, the cats. Just as the first part of the game had been rather harmless – the Explorers could not die, for example – but after the Haunt began it no longer was, Hannah also sees the cats as first as cute but then as ugly.

Hannah was involved with another player in two instances in the game narrating the gameplay: one with Pete and the other with Quinn. In the interview she thought back to the latter chain of events: “I thought I’d save everyone when I was going to the Bedroom to find the toy airplane. But then while I was still on my way there the woman found it on the other side of the mansion. And then I was miffed that I had to head that way instead but then I felt better when she suggested the escape deal. And I was the one to get that plane airborne first and I was really proud of that like, I didn’t get this game but then I got that plane, like I had the solution there. And I got our guys through three or four rooms by the end. All four of them.” She has a procession of events in mind that all center on her character. Not finding the air plane, having to dejectedly go where it was found, hatching a plan with Quinn to escape with just them two, getting the plane going and flying it to the Garden are all logically connected moments of the game recounted from her character’s perspective. While they could easily be put in gameplay words or recounted from the perspective of another character, that Hannah views them from her character’s point of view shows that at least at this point of the game – most of the latter half – she was immersed in the narrative of her character. It should be noted that though she perceives this linked chain of events and can account for her place in it, she nevertheless felt lost with the game.

Quinn described the Haunt beginning as a moment where the eyes of the characters were opened: “The tension that we had at the beginning – I’m sure everyone could feel that there was something wrong with this place – and that was the moment where that tension broke out and we saw the danger.” Unlike Hannah, Quinn enjoyed the Exploration phase of the game because “the beginning is like safe and I was just hoping to go around and find Items.” He does not find the Haunt to be a sea change in that regard, taking the activity from play to game.

Though Quinn names important turns in the game that he was involved in, Quinn didn’t see his character having any impact on the world per se: “I didn’t change anything I didn’t like pull any levers or anything well I did use the elevator and that changed the layout a bit. But overall I felt that my character was important to our escape. I powered on the plane that we escaped on. And with Jonah’s help I’d gotten the book that made our escape easier. In that sense it had an effect on the world or our progress in the world. But the world itself I didn’t really change.” He

also remembers being the one to find the plane. “That was important for our escape as well but I don’t know if that changed the world. It didn’t like leave a trace in the world but it left a trace on us in that we survived,” he said. Regardless of Quinn feeling that he didn’t change the world of the game, his actions (such as going to try and find the toy plane) were deliberate and occasioned a change in the state of the game – the Explorers went from having no means of escape to having one. It is not immediately clear why he feels that this does not “leave a trace” on the world, yet earlier in the above quote he associates changing the world with pulling levers.

Other events that the players mentioned in parts of the interview not directly related to the timeline of the game included Jonah finding the dog. He felt that was something important his character did as the dog was useful in delivering the Book to Quinn’s character. He also considered finding the Revolving Wall and the Mystic Slide noteworthy contributions. They also seemed to recognize the ending as a change in the world, as well as the time their plane is batted down. “That felt really aggravating. I was sure someone was going to die,” said Quinn. However, none of the players seemed to consider each time a room was discovered a change in the world. It is as if everyone thought of this as Richard thought of the Haunt: nothing in the world changed then, rather it was just discovered, a thing decided beforehand. The game rules use the word *discover* with reference to the rooms as I have used it as well, but the game mechanisms encourage thinking that the world is created during the game. The room tiles are coded on the back for whether they may be placed in the second floor, ground floor or basement. When a room tile needs to be drawn from the room tile stack, the players look at the back of the room tile on top of the stack. If it may be placed on the floor the explorer is on, the room tile is placed. If not, then the room tile is moved to the side and the players check the back of the next room tile. In this way, because most room tiles can be placed in more than one floor, which floors players head to first bears on which room tiles go to which part of the house. In addition, the players get to decide the specific makeup of the room tile network as they see fit – which room is ultimately next to another is not fixed, even should all room tiles be applicable to all floors.

Jonah at one point highlights the world varying from game to game: “I mean the rooms are always random and there’s Event cards, Omens and stuff and some rooms do stuff or you have to do something to get out of there or something.”

This brings up an interesting point. Is the world persistent? Is it there only for the one session, or is it in existence even when there are no players, just rebuilt each time and not recreated? If we imagine that the world is created anew each time, then the placement of a room tile is certainly a world changing event. If we imagine that the world is just rearranged, then the placement of a room tile is still a change – it is not where it used to be. However, if it is imagined that the rooms are discovered as if they had been placed there before the game, then tile placement is no change in the world in terms of narrative, though it may still be so in terms of gameplay.

In summary, most of the players clearly felt the world changed somewhat during the game, though how exactly it changed was not entirely clear. The single most recognizable change was the beginning of the Haunt, but even then there were a few interpretations as to the nature of the change. *Betrayal* suggested twists in the narrative through Event and Omen cards, the laying of room tiles, combat results, and the Haunt transition. Whether all of these constitute changes in the world as Ryan (2004) means, is not clear cut, however. Notably the most recognized change in the world, the Haunt, did not originate from deliberate human action but from what may or may not fit within the concept of ‘accidents’.

4.4 Interview: The psychological dimension – Why did that happen?

In this subchapter I collate what the interviewees said about causal relationships between actions or events, and any motivations they imagined anyone in the game world to have. The point is to find out why they thought the game went like it went. I’ll also consider what the players said about the story of the game and whether it had one. Because this subchapter is contingent on the findings of the previous subchapter, interviewee responses will be presented and analyzed issue by issue, with a wrap-up at the end. Most issues analyzed here are twists and turns and associated goals and plans and such as identified in 4.3, but some are related to parts of the game that were not world changers. As per Ryan’s (2004) third criterion, for the game to have a high degree of narrativity the players should be able to piece together a web of goals, plans, causal relations, and psychological motivations around what took place, giving the events of the previous subchapter coherence and intelligibility.

The players did not recall thinking or suggesting a reason for the eclectic troupe exploring the house in the first place. Richard wondered about this in the interview, and Jonah said that the players' motive to play was that they wanted to, but this motive was not conferred to their characters. The game rules and scenario books do not suggest a reason for the Explorers entering the house, nor for why they have come together in the first place. It may be taken as a weakness that the players did not come up with a premise for the story, but whether this is of the game or of the people is open to debate. The game leaving the premise wide open certainly leaves room for the players to come up with it, but should it also encourage an interpretation? On the other hand, we may simply attribute the lack of premise for this story to the players' lack of imagination and active effort to construct a story.

Pete took issue with the Haunt transition, stating that it was not appropriate to the game as a whole: "I thought the Haunt was overdone. Like everyone becoming mouse-size all of a sudden. It wasn't hard to imagine exactly but it didn't fit, I mean it should've been something not that supernatural and more like, like in Stephen King's *The Shining*. That someone realizes that they are behind all these murders and visions. I mean I think I think this was just like taken too far." Pete is unable to find a reason for why Father Reinhardt would've wanted to betray the party, why he had brought the vial containing the silver liquid that vaporized and shrunk everyone, and why he wanted to experiment with feeding miniature people to cats. None of this is given context for in the scenario guides, and Pete would've apparently needed more elaboration from the game on that.

The only time the traitor's motivations came up otherwise was with reference to a moment where Pete's character as the Traitor moved toward the Explorers, but didn't proceed to attack. While the others at the time figured that Pete might be coming to attack them, this was not the case. "I didn't have any plan for my character, I went toward Hannah to kind of try and confuse you guys a little but that wasn't like I mean I couldn't attack her anyway," he admits. The rules state that the Traitor may not attack the other characters, though they may attack him. Later he adds his motivation for the conceit: "I was just trying to get you to divert your attention from the cats to me and to maybe get you thinking that I'd be trying to save myself or that I controlled the cats." The latter evidently worked, as Jonah got the rest of the party thinking that if they get rid of Pete, perhaps the cats will cease to

pursue them. “I was thinking he was the hive mind,” said Jonah. That the game left Pete’s goals open to interpretation for the Explorers enabled them to imagine this scenario, however they could have ruled it out based on their own goals. The Explorers’ *Secrets of Survival* –book states only that they win the game if they find the toy plane and escape, not if Pete is killed and cats immobilized. While the game in a sense denies the Explorers’ version, they came up with it nonetheless.

Statistically, Pete’s cats should have beaten Jonah at some point. He was able to roll six dice for Might at most, whereas the cats rolled seven. Though Pete kept his cats focused on trying to eat Jonah, they never got him. Each time it was Jonah’s turn, whether he was attempting to escape from the clutches of a cat or to give them the old one-two, he succeeded. Pete said that he did not succeed in eating Jonah because he “had bad luck with the dice,” which Richard concurred with. Unlike them, Jonah uses story terms to explain why he was not eaten. He noted that the reason the cats kept attacking him was because he was “big for a mouse,” and he figured that he was “just too hardy” to get eaten. While Pete treats the matter coolly and disaffectionately, Jonah is able to get over the fact of the dice and imagine the character’s innate qualities causing his continued existence.

That time when the Explorers had to turn back to get Jonah before they could make their escape was caused by Quinn checking the rules and finding that they were not allowed to escape before every Explorer alive was on board. “You can’t leave a buddy behind in real life and then of course we couldn’t do that in a game either,” Hannah reasoned. She connects the game rule with a moral she ostensibly subscribes to in reality. This is the only time we get a direct glimpse in to the morality of the game world, which may be because the world felt similar to ours to the players, and thus they would project their morals unto their characters. In fact, earlier most players did state that they attempted to play their characters thinking about what they would do in a similar situation, morals and all.

When asked why Reinhardt didn’t win, why the Explorers were able to escape, Pete responded that he “just had bad luck with the dice. I was trying Jonah all the time but maybe I shoulda gone for a weaker one like at the end but then again they did always get to defend [he means escape] with their strongest stat so that didn’t really matter.” He again does not color the cold statistics up any. Quinn states

that it was the expected outcome and that there being more of them was significant: “Reinhardt died because or at least I was telling the others to at him because of his treachery like let’s just go do him in. That’s the reason he died, but well I like to think that the good guys deserve to win and we won through team play. Reinhardt was alone after all despite the cats. So teamwork, that’s why we won.” Richard agrees with the numerical advantage: “I think Reinhardt had a tough goal. We had a slight edge because there were four of us. Had we been fewer he would’ve won because of his advantages in dice and stuff. I think he lost because there were more of us.” Jonah figures that Pete’s primary weaknesses were the low Might of his character, leading to his quick demise, and the fact that he was the bad guy. Hannah attributes their victory to qualities shared by the players and the characters: “We were just so resilient. Even though we fell we were all ready to get out from the Garden and then the cats came again and we fell... Resilience.” Pete and Richard are again the ones to analyze the hard facts: bad die rolls coupled with the large number of explorers was not a winning combination. The others come up with different reasonings having to do with personal qualities and in Jonah’s case with a matter that the players discovered had nothing to with winning the game: the death of Father Reinhardt did not end the game, nor would he have been able to attack the other characters. His presence in gameplay terms was mere distraction.

Was there a story to the game they played? Pete and Hannah felt that there was clearly a story they played through, but it was one they had no part in shaping. “Well it was the kind of story the rules provided. Everyone was exploring the mansion and then all of a sudden everyone gets shrunk and one turns out to be a traitor and lets cats loose,” said Pete. Quinn found the role of the players to be bigger: “The rules frame the story but then we made it into a heroic story. We all got out after all. It was an exciting story with a happy end.” Richard was not so sure the game had a story to it: “We didn’t have like a background story on why we’re here and it feels a little dumb, I mean why would someone want to go to a place like that. It is the same in movies. The end was kind of exciting, but otherwise it was just exploration and survival.” Jonah’s response is creative as ever: “When we started playing I felt that there wasn’t a story there yet. Then we get a flashback situation or something like that or witchcraft or something and we’re taken to another dimension or point in time where something exactly like this happens.”

It is clear from the responses sampled here that there were moments where the players could picture character motivations, guess at plans and – once they were formally introduced – to ascertain goals. There is, however, nothing to indicate that they had a mental image of anything consistent from start to finish. Interpretations of character psychology and why things happen are only sporadic, not woven together from moment to moment to form a whole. Hannah's and Pete's narrative in the first half of the game was the most extended formulation of character feelings and why they wanted to move to certain parts of the mansion or why they were there together. That did not come up during the interview, however, and there's a distinct lack of a thread to the causalities the players identified. More often than not, reasons are given in gameplay terms and not story terms.

5 Discussion

So there you have it, now you know almost as much as I do about what went on in the minds of the players one March evening in 2014. Now, what can be said about the narrativity of *Betrayal at the House on the Hill*? In this chapter I pull together the findings of my analysis and discuss the ways in which the game and player interact to arrive at a narrative understanding, what kinds of cues the game gives the player, the balance of narrative power and what is special to board games in terms of narrative signification. I will also touch on Ryan's (2004) narrative criteria and their applicability to board games. In addition I submit ideas for future research and evaluate the validity and generalizability of my study and methods.

Both the gameplay video and the interview responses show that *Betrayal* made good on positing the existence of things and decorating them. The players discussed the appearance and nature of characters and items in the game world during the game and were able to enumerate them afterward. The game also posited changes to the world through its gameplay mechanisms, but many of these changes went unnoticed by some or all of the players. In their stead the players conceived of some changes that the game did not directly suggest, but which were a sum of the associations the players held with previous narrative experiences. A change in the world is a more complex concept than the existence of an entity, and accordingly the players were unable to name as many changes to the world as they could entities.

Lastly, the psychological dimension of the narrative saw the most varied player interpretations. The game suggested these far less than it suggested changes to the world, and the players also came up with fewer of their own interpretations here than they did with changes to the world. Though I expected a clearer timeline of events to be formed in the minds of the players, my hypothesis is thus confirmed: *Betrayal* fulfilled two out of the three criteria rather well, with a mental image of the world clearly transmitted, a chronology of events also painted but to a lesser extent, and the most difficulty it had allowing a psychological network to be imagined.

There are four ways the gameplay environment – the game material, players and physical location – served to create an illusion of a tangible world. First, it evoked previous narrative associations; that is it enabled a player to bring to mind something that he had experienced before in another narrative. Second, it provided a stage for the players to act out their imagination. Third, it conveyed information through the *mise-en-scène*, or the arrangement of pieces and cards and tiles on the table. For example, the distance between two character figures relative to the speed of the character and the number of room tiles between them shows how close characters were to each other. This information was used by Hannah and Pete extensively in their narration. Fourth, on top of all that, the gameplay environment provided resources for emergent storytelling, as in the example I just gave. Other examples of what gave birth to emergent narrative ideas are the physical appearance of character figures and the house as well as the music playing in the background.

Which had more to bear on the creation of the narrative, the game or the players? While the game pieces were found to provide fodder for imagination, the characters, for example, would have been much less detailed had the players not been willing to add detail. Certainly the players derived the character qualities they imagined from stats, character figures and flavor text on character disks, but factors external to the game created arguably more elaborate moments of narration and description. When Hannah attributed her gameplay performance to her character as a sense of being lost, or when Richard attributed Jonah's appearance to the character Jonah played, they were taking paint from a palette outside the game and using it to color their characters. In the latter case, a gameplay situation occasioned Richard's mental image, but in the former Hannah's sense of her own performance is not supplied by the game in any way. It is simply in her head, it is her own interpretation

of what she did in the game. I'd argue that were we to not have heard this evaluation from her the decisions she makes in the game could not be used to conclude that she played poorly, but she says she did anyway.

At a different juncture of the game the players narrated three separate ideas, repeating them to each other in an effort to find rapport. Such moments of collective imagination may lead to one of three outcomes: all players absorb each idea into their personal mental images of the story, they absorb only some of the ideas, or they absorb none. In this case, only one of the ideas was returned to at a later point of the game or reminisced in the interview. Occasions where multiple interpretations of events spring up, whether contradictory or not, put the players in the position of choosing for themselves which interpretations become part of their final mental image collection. The game may enable or even suggest the interpretations, but it is the players who decide which live and die.

Because of the player's power of conscious or unconscious ignorance of what the game throws at him it would appear that the player is in a position of authorship. On the other hand, the game's design and pieces restrict imagination to a point where trying to construct a narrative ignoring everything the game throws at you would require a huge amount of effort. As the players during the game never said that something didn't fit in the game, it may be said that they put as little conscious effort as they could into considering the cues the game gave them, only paying attention to them without the express purpose of constructing a narrative. They used story terms when they could without any conscious effort put into it, and gameplay terms when story terms weren't available.

So the story of the game is co-authored by the designers, who set the tone and establish the boundaries as well as invite the player to imagine a story with their creation, and the player, who picks what he likes and what he is able to utilize from the stimuli the game fires at him. Unlike a book or a movie, where there is a story present without the viewer, in a board game the game needs to be played for the story to be fully formed of the parts that come in the box. A film is complete in itself, though it can certainly be added to by the viewer, but a game is incomplete without the experienter.

Both co-authors can also inhibit the narrative creation. The character figures evoked associations with movies and the music with related and unrelated TV-shows. The former were created by the game designers whereas the latter was put on by the players. A more detailed figure would have restricted the imagination more, but on the other hand a vague or crude figure leaves more room to imagine its likeness in the game world. The narrative accentuation that is the effect of the music is dependent on the game's narrativity to call for it, but it is the players' choice what is put on. The designers can also create obstacles for imagination with rules and scenarios that, in terms of signification, are at odds with the game as a system. For example, in the scenario played out in *Betrayal* this time it was let on in the Traitor's Tome that the Traitor was planning to betray the part from the start, but the game mechanisms suggest that no one is a Traitor from the beginning. This can be overcome of course by the players simply adopting the idea of the Traitor having schemed up front and weaving that into their mental images of the first part of the game in retrospect. It would appear that this time that did not happen though, as some of the players found the Haunt contrived with respect to the Traitor's motives.

The players can themselves also cause similar difficulties. For example, when Hannah felt that she did not want to play her character after he was deemed to be the traitor, the players decided that she switch characters. Not paying attention to the rules explanation is another way of confusing oneself, but the seed of confusion can be in one's head before you even arrive at the game venue. Board games carry expectations of options being clearly outlined and everything being mentioned in the rules. While this is the case with *Betrayal* as well – there are no rules that are not in the rule book – there are many cases where the interaction of various game elements is not spelled out in the rules. In fact, the rules openly encourage players to imagine and come up with their own solutions. This kind of creativity is uncommon to board games and is more akin to tabletop roleplaying games, where players may propose to do anything they want and a game master determines how they can succeed in their endeavor. The time a game goes on for is crucial to narrative creation as well. Too little, and there would not be enough opportunity, but too much and the window begins to close as the players become weary. The latter case is especially something the players can add to: dawdling, confusion and overthinking all add to the length of a game and are caused by the players to their own detriment.

However, the other players are, in comparison to other narrative media and video games, the strength of board games as well. They help each other consciously and unconsciously arrive at narrative interpretations and to overcome obstacles to imagination. They aid in keeping our imaginations grounded to the game. They extrapolate on the fodder the game provides and add influences that the game does not convey. By bringing something of themselves into the game world the characters in the world become more recognizable to us the more we know our co-players. Personal history between people can give a game depth and create new personal history, a cycle of at best deepening relationships. While this can be true of some video games as well, the physical presence, the ability to touch and to see the faces of one another should not be discounted.

With this aspect in mind, does the story end at the conclusion of the game? We talk about movies and books outside the moment where we're consuming them. As a nexus where prior associations and memories meet with new ones in the making, a game might be said to be more immersive if it still brought thoughts together after consumption. In my experience, as game sessions become part of the personal history between players, the stories formed during them are returned to and elaborated on or reformulated in later games as well as outside games.

The question of when does the story end is worth considering from a research design perspective too. It is difficult to separate what the players imagined during the game from what they come up with afterward. Even they can't always tell. Players came up with associations, imaginings and explanations during the interview that they had not thought of during the game, and I had to ask time and time again whether what they just said was something they thought of during the game or just then afterward. While perhaps induced by the focused discussion on the game's story elements, are ideas born after the fact to be ignored? Is reasoning uttered after the fact because it was elicited less genuine or less indicative of a game's narrativity than reasoning uttered on the spot? How can we determine that an observation later uttered did not occur on the spot? Things flash through our minds and if we forget and there's no record of them, we can't say it happened, but we can't say it didn't happen either. In this study a difference was made between mental images formed exclusively during the game and only after it, with the former given precedence, but in further research this divide is worth reconsidering.

If we now turn to Ryan's (2004) criteria for narrativity, let us begin by considering the five distinct narrative modes. First, board games appear to be another medium that marries diegetic narration and mimetic narration – the verbal act of telling on the part of the players and the rules, and the act of showing on the part of the pieces, which are an extension of the game designers. Second and likewise a board game can be both autonomous and illustrative simultaneously, though it appears to rely more on the latter. The story told in *Betrayal* was new to the receivers, but as we saw they had difficulty retrieving logical relations from the game material. What aided them and what appears must be integral to the design of narrative games is retelling and complementing tropes and stories of which the receivers have previous knowledge. So far then, if the former in both distinctions was likely to be more palatable to researchers as narrative, board games muddy the waters.

In the third distinction, between receptive and participatory, board games are clearly in the latter. The recipients are player who have an active role in the story, contributing to how it pans out. Less clear cut is the fourth division between determinate and indeterminate narrative. If the narrative of a game is a trajectory passing through points in space, in the case of *Betrayal* the game arguably falls under the latter banner. Were the story more rigorous, the events of the game fewer and more definite, the game might be said to belong in the former category, where enough points in space are provided that the narrative trajectory is reasonably easy to follow. In the same vein the fifth distinction between literal and metaphorical narrative – meeting the definition of narrative entirely vs. meeting it only in part – is highly game dependent. In the case of *Betrayal*, I would argue that the game evokes a literal narrative. It fulfills the definition of narrative entirely, if only just. In that case, in light of the final three distinctions, it could be said board games teeter on the brink, perhaps slightly quivering to the side of less likely to be commonly accepted as narrative by researchers.

However, were Ryan's (2004) three criteria for possessing narrativity made slightly more rigorous and detailed, board games might generally fall into the metaphorical narrative camp and be pushed over to the unlikely-to-be-accepted side of the yard. The first one, proposing the existence and qualities of characters and objects is quite clear, but I have some reservations about the other two criteria.

Are all events in the game world changes to the world? In the case of *Betrayal*, is each Event card a change in the game world? None of the cards depicts a habitual change, such as a change in the weather, but neither do they all cause any changes to anything. The ones that cause some change, like a character to exist in the world, are not always describable as accidents or deliberate human actions. In some cases there appeared to be an actor behind the action, but it was not human – as in the case of a Creepy Puppet attacking Jonah. Regardless, all the Event card events are easily placed on a timeline of events even if they cause no changes. The players did not recognize changes in their character stats as changed to the game world, but I posit that it should be taken as a change of state in the world. It is part of the specific narrative of a character: were the events of a game to be recounted from the perspective of a character, stat changes would certainly be included – hopefully with a little coloring in of why they changed. More elaboration on what count as changes in the story world is necessary for Ryan's (2004) concepts to become a proper analysis framework.

As for the third criteria, allowing for the reconstruction of an interpretive network of goals, plans, causal relations, and psychological motivations around the narrated events, what if a game denies a narrative or a causal relation, but the players still arrive at it? For example, in the case of *Betrayal*, some of the players persisted in thinking the dog had not shrunk, while the game clearly proposes that it did. Does the game allow for this causal relation in Ryan's sense or does it not? Because the crux of Ryan's (2004) definition of narrative is that it is made in the mind, it would make sense that the mind of the player takes precedence in such cases. The point of Ryan's (2004) definition as I understand it is that logical relations must be formed, and whether they contradict the narrative otherwise is immaterial.

Despite these considerations, Ryan's (2004) definition of narrative has shown itself to be quite workable and both inclusive and intuitive. The result of this study then is that per her definition, board games may be said to have quite a high degree of narrativity. The narratives formed, however, are not as may be expected from non-participatory media. They are less linear and readymade, requiring work from the players to the point of co-authorship to really weave together a whole from the narrative bites formed during the game. The specialty of board games is to weave personal relationships into the stories and vice versa.

The results of this study apply best to *Betrayal at House on the Hill*, but are not incompatible with board games in general. At the very least, the findings here serve as a platform for the continued study of board game narratives as a form of conversational storytelling grounded in play. Further studies of interest would be to compare plastic character models of varying detail versus simple wooden shapes – if all else was the same, would there be a difference in how or what they evoke? The nature of board games and the amount of detail they are able to convey in this respect could also be compared and contrasted to that of the first person video game. Only the surface of how players specifically take cues from game pieces could be scratched in this study, and in terms of signification and how players receive, select, dissect and reject signs from the game is a question where much work could yet be done.

6 Conclusion

This research explored the relationship of narratives and games from a cognitive perspective through a medium not previously considered. To avoid previous pitfalls in the discourse, a fresh definition of narrative in connection with methods previously untested in this context were chosen. The questions asked in this paper revolved around the following central themes: What in board games entices narrative understanding? How do players take cues from the game to build a chronology for events, a broader temporal and spatial environment for those events and an inventory of characters involved? How do players identify with the characters and their perception of the game- or storyworld? What can board games show us about narrative in games? Is there a way of signification in formal play that is special to games?

To study where game, story and mind meet five volunteers played *Betrayal at House on the Hill*, and gave an account of the events, changes, characters and motives – in short, the world – they experienced. Observation of the gameplay, a video recording of it, the transcription of that video and a loose, casual semi-structured group interview were used to get a glimpse into the mind of players as interpreters and authors of narrative. The interview was structured around an

understanding of narrative as a cognitive construct, wherein a narrative must fulfill three criteria to constitute narrativity.

The results of this study show that board games may be said to have quite a high degree of narrativity. The narratives formed, however, are not as may be expected from non-participatory media. They are less linear and readymade, requiring work from the players to the point of co-authorship to really weave together a whole from the narrative bites formed during the game. The specialty of games is to weave personal relationships into the stories and vice versa. Though the findings of how volunteers specifically take narrative cues from *Betrayal at House on the Hill* apply only to this game session – the whole of the game, the players and the time and location - , the results are not incompatible with board games in general. The core differences perceived between *Betrayal* and other narratives are applicable to other board games as well in so far as they pertain to the participatory nature of games, the tactile aspects of board games and interplay between game design and game player. The findings of this study may, if nothing else, be a precursor for future studies of board game narratives as a form of conversational storytelling steeped in play.

In studying games and stories, whether in conjunction or separately, it is fruitful to explore distinct modes of gaming separately. Only the surface of what distinguishes board games from video games and tabletop role-playing games has been scratched in this study, but even then I submit that an untapped vein of information has been discovered. Furthermore, the cognitive approach to narrative as a mental image instead of a textual feature was found useful in this study. The definitive cleft between narrative and narrativity is especially useful for broadening the scope of what may be regarded a story while maintaining appropriate scientific rigor.

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